

# Are You Brainwashed?

by Sahlan Diver

Hossanah and I used to know a very nice couple — Jehovah's witnesses. As I say, a very nice couple: never did they intrude their beliefs into our conversations with them, except for the once. I had asked the lady if she and her husband would like to attend a surprise birthday party I was planning for Hossanah, and she replied in a very offhand manner, 'No. We don't believe in birthdays.' That's when I realised the acquaintance could never turn into a true friendship. There would always be this barrier beyond which you knew you wouldn't be able to pass.

So, does that mean, since Hossanah and I both had a Protestant upbringing, that we couldn't be friends with Catholics either? No. There is a subtle difference between a mainstream religious belief and the beliefs of a fanatical sect or cult. It's not just that the former is more relaxed. People have grown up with their religion it's more of an accepted part of life, just another thing you do in addition to eating, drinking, working, playing and making love. There's less of a complexity. Basically, mainstream religion boils down to two things, belief in an after-life, and trying to be a better person in your current life. Regarding the first, so what if you believe in an after-life, none of us will know what's really true till we get to the other side, and regarding the second, trying to be a better person, who can argue with that?

Cults, sects and fanatical religions are distinguished by a strong emotional attachment to their central tenets and almost invariably by special ideas that their members will not let go of, despite evidence to the contrary. Luckily, we're not like that in Subud, are we? Well, after five years of presenting Subud members with a wealth of evidence, I say we are. I say Subud members are totally unwilling to either see or act on what is staring them in the face, and the reason is due to a little thing called 'brainwashing'.

The claim that Subud members have been brainwashed might seem outlandish. Bear with me. For some, 'brainwashing' may conjure up images of a second rate horror movie, people wandering zombie-like down the street ready to do the bidding of their arch-evil master. But successful brainwashing is more insidious than that. You don't need to turn somebody into a zombie, too much of a give-away, and in any case not possible outside of a Hollywood movie. All that's really necessary is to instill a few central ideas which become for the person the essential criteria against which some other ideas are judged. I say 'some other ideas' rather than 'all other ideas' because it is possible for a person to act most of the time in a fully normal, capable and aware manner, yet for a significant area of their life be willing to put aside awareness, to ignore and shut out the promptings of their mind, and to summarily discard the contradictions that are crying out for attention.

So, if there were a 'spiritual brainwashing kit' on special offer this week at your local discount store, what would you expect it to contain?

First it would need to supply an authority figure. Not just any old authority figure but someone who seems to have special powers, such as a certain charisma, or the gift of spiritual healing. Maybe they are a speaker who can bring a crowd to a frenzy or alternatively to an atmosphere of submissive devotion — whatever. It doesn't matter

whether the figure is evil or benign, they just need to seem to have something that we other mere mortals do not possess.

Second it would need to contain a ready-made sect or cult, headed up by said authority figure. And this is very important: although the cult may be hierarchical, the authority levels of the hierarchy are as nothing compared to the supreme authority of the leader. Remember he or she knows so much more than us mere mortals.

Thirdly, you need a set of ideas provided by said authority figure. Since we have already invested him with authority, it follows that all his ideas must be treated as similarly authoritative.

Fourthly, and this helps a lot, modest speeches by the authority figure where he dismisses any suggestion that he is more than an ordinary mortal, while at the same time telling stories which paint him in a most extraordinary light.

It doesn't take much wit on the part of the reader to see that Bapak fits the above requirements, but where's the connection to brainwashing? Am I suggesting Bapak or Subud deliberately set out to brainwash Subud members? Certainly not. But I am suggesting that Subud members have brainwashed themselves, as a result of their collective enthusiasm for all things Bapak and all things Subud.

Here's the evidence: seven specifically Subud ideas that Subud members have relied on for decades and will find very hard to let go of. Notice that I say 'Subud ideas' rather than 'Bapak ideas' because in many cases one can see that an idea that originated with Bapak may have been misunderstood, distorted or exaggerated by Subud members. However, because the idea originated with Bapak it carries his authority and demands allegiance as far as members are concerned.

### **1) The concept of 'harmony' being paramount, as promoted by Bapak**

The influence of this is all-pervasive: the dislike of negative comment about Subud, the current officially sponsored interest in positive opinion only, the emphasis in Subud meetings on achieving a good atmosphere (whether they make good decisions or not seems to be of secondary importance), and so forth. We now have the ridiculous situation where Subud members are turning to other techniques such as NVC (non-violent communication) to try to achieve harmony. Ridiculous, not because there is anything necessarily wrong with techniques like NVC, but because here we have Subud believing its destiny is to bring harmony to the world, but by its own admission is so inept at achieving harmony it has to turn to other techniques for assistance. From one point of view you could say Subud is a miserable failure. However, there is another way of looking at it. We could start to see Bapak's concept of 'harmony' for what it is — a specifically Indonesian concept that doesn't sit well with other cultures and which is therefore unsuitable as a universal goal. I appreciate it's difficult to drop an idea we have been brainwashed into believing is central to Subud, but think of the advantages: meetings can start to work at doing the right thing, rather than just the harmonious thing; people with grievances will be able to speak out and be heard; problems will be addressed and resolved rather than festering for years because nobody wants to rock the boat.

There's another very important reason why our reliance on the concept of harmony is

wrong. People are told, and it states on our web sites, that you don't have to adopt any beliefs to join Subud, that the latihan is your own teacher, and so on. Yet by running its affairs on the basis of the central concept of harmony, Subud is quite clearly imposing a teaching and a belief on its members. It's a well-known characteristic of cults to maintain a private face that is unashamedly and unapologetically different from the public face used to attract members. But, Subud's not like that, Subud's not a cult. At least, we say it's not a cult, right?

## 2) Subud activity as being special

This idea started with enterprise. Bapak's idea for enterprise was simple. Get active, make money, and give 25% of profits to charity. But, somewhere along the line this simple and noble idea was overtaken by another idea — that Subud was on a mission to show the world how to do business honestly. We allowed ourselves to ignorantly and arrogantly dismiss *all* business, whether large or small, whether public or private, as inherently corrupt and dishonest. Subud was going to show the world a new kind of business model. Not satisfied to be world business leaders (in our imaginations at least), we then went on to claim leadership of world culture through SICA. Quite recently I read yet another missive telling us that SICA is so special they are still trying to come up with a definition that will do it justice.

There was a suggestion on a Subud forum recently that Subud has shown it does not need 'organisation' in the sense that we normally understand it. The idea was expanded on in detail in [this Subud Vision article](#). I happen to disagree with the theory, but what specifically bothers me is the suggestion made that by failing at organisation Subud thereby has a lesson not just for itself but for the whole world. We seem to so easily put Subud at the centre of everything, like when groups test the significance of Subud for their town, the town may be blissfully unaware of Subud but nevertheless the implication is that the fortune of the town rides on the tiny Subud group's machinations.

Who do we blame for our desire for Subud to be seen as special? Again, probably Bapak. He put the idea in our heads that our progress in the latihan would mark us out. And, with enterprise, he encouraged that thought by grandiose investment schemes promoted on the dubious premise that God would look after us if we showed the right attitude. Clearly Bapak was wrong. The majority of members invested in good faith, some even risking their homes to raise money. Did God look after them? No. They were still prey to the few who were in charge and incapable of running the project for a mixture of reasons ranging from well-intentioned incompetence to downright corruption. Let's face it; Bapak's schemes wouldn't have lasted five minutes on Dragon's Den. A dodgy investment premise for a project run by insufficiently experienced management? No way!

If we had not been so willing to be brainwashed by Bapak's advice on enterprise, we might have used our creativity and enthusiasm to come up with more effective and less risky strategies. Here's one: Invest cautiously, on a small scale at first, in promising local projects (not necessarily Subud projects — deprogram yourself from the idea that Subud is special). As we become more experienced, extend the range and scope of investment. If Subud seeks kudos, it's much more likely to achieve it through the honest and enthusiastic support of local enterprise than through trying to show off with 'international big business'.

### **3) All publicity is propaganda**

Subud members seem to have a dread of publicity. Some Subud web sites have been obliged to block Google finding the names of their contributors, who don't want to be seen to be connected with 'something weird like Subud'. I know of a school headmaster, an ex-Subud member, who was worried that his association with Subud might prejudice his career; I know of people who are terrified that neighbours in their village might find out they are in Subud. Watch the World Congress video where people are asked about Subud and fumble for words to describe it. All this from an organisation which thinks it has the answer to the world's problems. Come on. Who are we kidding? If Subud had a package that was universally acceptable it would be out there with it, not awkwardly keeping it secret.

On the Subud Vision web site some authors have suggested that Bapak's prohibition against publicity came about because of the very tense political situation in Indonesia at the time. Again, I suggest we reject the brainwashing and try something different. A teacher of music knows the best way to hone a pupil's performance skills is not to hide them away till they have privately developed into virtuosi — you get them out there in concerts, and they'll soon find out how and where they need to improve. Similarly, if Subud were advertised in the newspaper with a view to attracting new people, we'd get a much better idea of how we measure up to expectations as a supposed 'universal spiritual practise', 'for all of humankind'.

And for those who would smile knowingly and say 'but God guides people to Subud, when they are ready,' I remind them of David Week's observation that the proportion of ethnic minorities in Subud in various countries and cities is much lower than the proportion of those same minorities amongst the country's or city's general population. Do you wish to claim, then, that God's guidance favours people with white skin?

### **4) Testing is superior to thinking and voting**

Testing is used for all the major decisions in Subud: group chair, national chair, zonal chair, WSA chair, where to hold World Congress, whether to take a certain action or not. Curious, our faith in testing, when even Bapak said that testing was quite often wrong. Notice that my list contains only committee-related matters, yet we still insist on involving the helpers — hardly the separation between committee and helper duties that Bapak envisaged. And I haven't even started on how we get landed, through testing, with helpers for life, with no say or comeback as to whether we members, from experience of these people, find them to be suitable or not.

We can't let go of the idea that testing will give us better results than decisions made through researching, debating and voting. There is no evidence that testing leads to better results. On the contrary, on two recent occasions the locations tested as best for World Congress had to be rapidly changed at the last minute. Admittedly the same could have happened if we had chosen locations from our minds, but isn't it the point that testing is always justified on the grounds that it is superior to the 'mere mind' — that it can take into account factors that the mind cannot be aware of?

There are many reasons why testing is a bad idea for collective decision making. They have all been covered in articles by various authors on Subud Vision and there's no

need to repeat them here. Instead, I ask why we so tenaciously hold on to the practise, without questioning its appropriateness or usefulness. I can offer only brainwashing as an explanation.

### **5) The progress of Subud is directed by Almighty God**

It's just an idea, that's all. Since none of us are on direct speaking terms with the Almighty, nor able to see the future, there is no way we can know whether it is true or not. Yet the idea is all-powerful. It's one of those circular ideas like 'The Bible is the word of God' that it's pointless to argue against, because the proponents of this idea put the idea before evidence. If you say the Bible wasn't written in English, it was a translation, then they'll just say God guided the translators; if you point out the influences in the Bible of the laws and customs of the time, they'll just say that God selected the ones he approved to be mentioned, and so on. Similarly, if you point out how Subud has had no significant influx of members since 1957, they'll just say — it's a deliberate part of God's plan, wait and see; if you question why this or that failed, they'll say it's God's test for us. Interestingly, the 'don't try to go faster than God' excuse is always wheeled out whenever anyone suggests doing something new in Subud. But how do they know that the person making the suggestion isn't in fact being guided by God at that point to suggest the next move forward for Subud? In this respect the idea has a lot in common with political brainwashing, which seeks to maintain power by reducing citizens to a state of humble acquiescence with the way things are.

### **6) Subud will grow when we are ready**

There is one common characteristic in brainwashing situations. The implanted ideas must on no account be questioned or sacrificed, so it must be the *people* who are wrong. Combine this with a spiritual movement that has an inbred notion of personal progress over time and you have the perfect Subud excuse for rejecting new ideas out of hand: clearly that person hasn't grown sufficiently to see the error of their thinking; obviously Subud is not making progress because we haven't developed far enough in the latihan, we are not diligent enough, we have the wrong attitude — in short, we are unworthy.

### **7) We have the latihan. That's all that matters**

If only! If only Subud was just about latihan, without all the promotion of the sayings of Bapak, the urgent distribution of Ibu Rahayu's latest missive, without the SICA and enterprise propaganda, without the clubbish exclusivity, without our cumbersome, Congress-led hierarchy slowing Subud down to a snail's pace, without the funny ideas and customs that make it impossible for us to talk freely about the latihan to family, friends and acquaintances.

### **Personal Conclusion**

Ten years ago, when I started writing critically about Subud], some people sought to label me as being a radical dissident. All I wanted to do was find ways of improving Subud through examination and change. However, I accept that to many my views would have seemed extreme. But I no longer accept the extremist classification. Why? Not because my views have changed, but because I know of many others who are now more radical than me. I, at least, have held on in hope to 'Plan A' — change within Subud, but others have now abandoned that in favour of 'Plan B' — a new organisation

dedicated to promoting the latihan. These people are weary of Subud's stagnation, its excuses, its smugness, its willful closing of ranks in the face of criticism, its overbearing preachiness towards its own members, its marginalising of the very people who have the talent, energy and brains to help it prosper. I believe that new organisations may turn out to be substantially different from Subud. One thing they will probably do is advertise the latihan widely, so at least, Subud members, that's one thing that will change for you — you won't need to be coy about the latihan any more. Maybe it will become as well known as yoga.

Is it too late for Subud to regain the initiative? Not quite, but I estimate there's a year at most, maybe two, before matters are taken out of Subud's hands. Funnily enough, this is the best possible time for Subud to change, while the long-term members are still alive and able to contribute the benefit of their long experience, but only if they are willing to put aside their pride, their fear, and dare I say it, the brain-washing.