

Can Subud Grow without Faith?

by Sahlan Diver

A concept common to the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is that God has from time to time sent messengers or prophets to bring mankind back to a more 'righteous' path. This is a matter of faith and belief, as nobody can actually prove that these people were sent by a higher power – maybe they were just exceptional good guys, a statistic waiting to happen at some time in history, in the same way that we can think of Gandhi as being an exceptionally good person without having to think of him as being specially 'sent'.

Subud is not a religion. If it were, it is unlikely that members would be happy being, for example, Christian or Moslem at the same time as belonging to Subud. However, Subud has not been entirely free of an element of religious faith. The religious idea of a messenger sent by a higher power has found its way into Subud through the suggestion in Bapak's talks that the Almighty has sent the latihan, rather than yet another prophet, as a kind of last chance for mankind. It is clear that Bapak accordingly felt he had a God-given mission to spread the latihan and that he expected Subud members to be his helpers and successors in this mission. Furthermore his expectation and advice was that Subud would spread not through propaganda, but through members becoming active in enterprise with the aim of creating wealth for the financing of humanitarian aims. Put very crudely, the implied 'ground plan' was something like this: (Step 1) the latihan improves our character, energy and capabilities; (Step 2) it also makes us more aware of the needs of others; (Step 3) we start charitable projects, but (new idea) we also start enterprises with the aim of giving 25% of profit towards the charitable projects, thus making possible much more than could be achieved through personal donations alone; (Step 4) our charitable achievements demonstrate our sincerity, so we don't need propaganda, and our business achievements demonstrate that we are not just a pie-in-the-sky spiritual movement, but a movement in tune with using the benefits of the modern world as a means to improve the lot of mankind; (Step 5) this attracts new members, and so the circle goes on, ever upwards.

The enterprise concept, after the lack of achievement and failure of the large enterprise projects, is now very much out of fashion. Actually, I am not convinced the concept ever was that much 'in fashion'. As an applicant in 1972, it was obvious to me even then that there was already a strong undercurrent of discontent about Bapak's urgings on enterprise. Nevertheless huge financial risk and commitment was subsequently undertaken by members from all over the world to support Bapak's big projects. In fact,

without such a commitment those projects could never have happened. They weren't the kind of enterprise that grows organically from small beginnings through their founders' determination, aptitude, and willingness to learn from mistakes. These were enterprises that got a kick start with 'easy money', and therein, of course, lie dangers. Unfortunately, because Bapak promoted both the vision of enterprise, and the method by which it should be carried out, the discrediting in practice of the method has tended to discredit the vision also, by association. My own belief is that Bapak, as a spiritually inspired person, got the big picture right, but was wrong to focus all our efforts onto a single means of attempting to realise that vision, namely through big projects run by a few members of limited experience, financed by many members of limited means.

When the Subud Vision project started up last year, some early commentators protested that we didn't need to discuss changing anything in Subud, because the form of Subud has been given to us by Bapak and all we need to do is provide the content. This argument might have some validity were Subud members currently fully supportive of Bapak's vision for the development of Subud, but no way can this be said to be so. Bapak wanted Subud members to be pro-active in enterprise development. I suggest that this has become now very much a minority interest, that the majority either think these matters are purely down to individual conscience, or want to go further than that and see the enterprise/Subud-changing-the-world idea disowned as being motivated merely by a mixture of hubris and naivety.

The reader may ask, 'Why should we do Subud as Bapak wanted; why can't we do it the way we want?' That is a reasonable question, which I don't object to. What I do object to is the pretence that Subud is currently following the path that Bapak wished for it, or even worse, that our current path is somehow being guided by God, that it is some mysterious working out of 'God's plan' for Subud.

So, what will the Subud of the future look like, if members follow their own desires and hopes for it, instead of Bapak's? We don't need to ask, as that future is already here, and has been here for the last ten, maybe even twenty, years. This Subud looks like a sparsely populated spiritual movement which meets locally twice a week with very little happening apart from the latihans, except that periodically it rustles up a larger national or international gathering which has the desirable side-effect of being a great social occasion for reviving flagging enthusiasm. Overall, however, as first generation members die off in increasing numbers, it looks likely that Subud will diminish further and it seems unlikely it will ever grow again in significant numbers. Of our very few newly opened members, 90% leave. Subud apparently does not offer sufficient that is attractive or compelling.

What if Bapak were right? That Subud can only grow through the

development of humanitarian projects supported by enterprise, and that Subud has a mission to fulfill both this aim and the spread of the latihan. There is no proof that this is so – it's a matter of faith. Without sufficient sharing of that faith there may be no possibility of Subud ever growing.