

Conundrum

By Sahlan Diver

The excellent 'Subud TV' reports from the New Zealand World Congress featured a brief interview with our newly appointed WSA chair, in which he described Subud as a 'brotherhood'. Maybe we can forgive this unfortunate, extremely anachronistic slip of the tongue, on the grounds that the speaker was probably feeling pretty spaced out by the end of Congress, but if we were looking for a symbol that Subud policy for the next four years is likely to be just business as usual, this surely must be it.

Before World Congress, several people said to me that they were 'waiting to see what happens in New Zealand' before considering their options of what to do next. The implication was that they were seriously reconsidering their support for the Subud organisation. Of course, many people who valued the latihan but couldn't tolerate 'Subud' already have left, in most cases never to be seen again, but this time it's different. Subud Vision has provided a forum and rallying point for people who have grown tired of Subud's internal propaganda, though we can't claim all the credit — the longer Subud goes on, repeating the same mistakes, gradually diminishing in size and effectiveness, the more exposed becomes the lie that it will all work out in the end. And next month, a new web site will appear that, as well as offering support and resources to latihan practitioners within Subud, will actively encourage those who wish to form new latihan groups, i.e. not breakaway Subud groups, but independent latihan groups that have nothing whatsoever to do with the Subud organisation.

It's common to hear people who leave Subud dismissed as 'misfits', or with whatever other facile insult happens to come to hand. Such comments conveniently overlook the fact that many who leave are not the weak unfortunates they are made out to be, but are often highly capable people who previously devoted much time and effort to Subud, in some cases over decades. Previously there has been no alternative place for these people to go, but imagine what it might be like if these leavers get together and get organised. Capable people make capable organisations that attract capable people. What starts off as a trickle might eventually become a flood. By the time Subud wakes up to what is happening, it will be too late.

When Subud Vision started three years ago, I wrote an article setting out a Plan A (change within Subud) and a Plan B (forming a new organisation). At that time, no other Subud Vision editor, author or correspondent agreed with Plan B. The picture three years later is very different. For example, here's an excerpt from a recent e-mail I received: 'I'm beginning to see that Subud will never change. What we have all been critiquing is, I see now, intrinsic, inherent, essentially what "Subud", the movement, is all about. It doesn't even seem that the latihan is at the centre any longer — in the UK, at least — having become a mere ingredient of the whole Bapak/Ibu-centric, social, organisational and financial mix that is "Subud-the-religion" today.'

It seems inevitable now that there will be a new organisation, independent of Subud. Quite possibly, such an organisation will actively advertise the latihan in the media so as to attract new members. Let's consider the prospects.

Michael Irwin recently wrote an article, 'Wayward', a story in which he attempts to imagine how a latihan group could operate free of any dogma, free of any peer pressure to adopt a preferred belief system, and free of any pressure for members to support preferred activities. His imaginary group has three key means to achieve this. First, people can come and latihan without becoming 'members' — there is no

requirement to identify yourself with an organisation with an implied philosophy. Secondly, there is the 'neutrality agreement' that enshrines the rule that those who do become members of the official organisation must not in their official capacity, for example if they are helpers, promote any particular world or spiritual view, which incidentally includes not promoting Bapak's talks and teachings. Thirdly, for shared social, cultural, intellectual or spiritual interests the latihan practitioners at the local centre may form clubs, as long as these are independent of and not sponsored by the main organisation. There might, for example, be formed a club to promote interest in Bapak's writings.

I like Michael's model of the neutral latihan because that seems to me to be the only way the latihan can be kept as 'your own teacher' without interference from dogma. The 'clubs' model enables special interest groups to operate without contaminating the core practise. Could such a model work for a new organisation outside of Subud?

The first thing to be aware of is that Michael's story imagines not a new organisation, but a group within Subud that has decided to do things very differently. We can assume that, as a Subud group which is described in the story as a *large* Subud group, it already had a good deal of social cohesion, and that what has happened is that this cohesion has been reorganised into a new model. We cannot deny that Subud has had many strongly cohesive features. One is the 'us and them' model (which is, incidentally, typical of cults): the world needs what we have to offer but doesn't realise it; the world is big and evil (or at least ridden with nafsu); we are small but with the right attitude and the right forces behind us. Therefore it is very important we stick together (the tribal approach). Other things that bind us are our Subud social life, our special long-term Subud friendships, our shared special activities, such as Ramadan, Bapak tape nights, selamatans, our big Congresses reminiscent of the time when members gathered from far and wide for Bapak's visits, our discussions and efforts on SDI, enterprises, culture and so on.

Now take all that away, the special destiny, the feeling of being a specially favoured group, the long-term friendships, and imagine we start a new organisation from scratch with just the latihan. Why should we then be any different from, say, a yoga class? When people go to a yoga class, they don't expect to get involved in clubs or social activities as well. If they have other interests, they can pursue those elsewhere, not just with yoga people. And apart from the minority who might be interested in studying the history of yoga, why would they want to do anything other than the yoga itself? We need to realise that a lot of what binds Subud people together comes from the way it operated in the past. A new model wouldn't have this binding factor; people would just be coming for latihan — that's all.

Some might say that my analysis is wrong, that in fact it is the latihan that binds us, the other activities just being symptomatic of that binding. I would dispute that view. If the latihan binds us, we would expect the cohesion of Subud to be strongest at the group level where people latihan together most frequently. The opposite appears to be the case. Hold a Congress and find out how many people want to do special testing because they can't stand the attitude of their local helpers. I heard a story recently of two ladies in a group that was once a model of co-operation and achievement reviving a dispute that was at least forty years old.

So it is reasonable to ask whether, in a new organisation that promoted latihan without any cohesive extras, sufficient numbers would continue the latihan long-term to enable the building of a critical mass. Mightn't it always be a very small and little-known practise, so small that it eventually fades away altogether?

And there is also the question of the 'effectiveness' of the latihan. Ex Subud member, Martin (formerly Dirk) Campbell, e-mailed me a very interesting article this week, by

J.G. Bennett, written at a time when Bennett was clearly reconsidering his attitude to Subud, though hadn't yet gone as far as leaving it. In the article, Bennett explains how he believes the latihan to be a unique, transforming energy that would be almost impossible to obtain through learnt spiritual self-development techniques. But it is clear also, from what he says in the same article, that Bennett is starting to doubt whether the latihan by itself is sufficient for spiritual progress. His principle objection is that the benefit of the latihan can be dissipated through wrong behaviour in the individual's life, and that spiritual self-study is needed to minimise the risk of this happening. For Bennett, 'spiritual self-study' meant reviving the techniques he had learned from his former teachers, Ouspensky and Gurdjieff.

It suddenly occurred to me that in fact Bapak and Bennett were at one in this opinion of the latihan. In his talks, Bapak constantly warns of the need to be diligent, and recommends practises such as *prihatin*, Ramadan and Lent fasting, even stressing the importance of finding one's true religion, as ways to ensure that the benefit of the latihan is not lost. And, unpopular and unfashionable as the idea now is, wasn't the other main reason for 'enterprise', outside of making money, that it would create activities to engage the 'lower forces' and thereby lessen their grip on us?

No doubt, many members, especially older members, will feel that without Bapak's guidance and the traditional extras associated with Subud: name change, body testing, fasting etc., people simply won't get sufficient benefit out of the latihan. On the other hand, a distinctly religious (with a small 'r') movement would seem to have very little chance of anything other than minority acceptance in the modern world.

Herein lies a conundrum: take away the bolted-on spirituality from the latihan practise, and what are the chances people will persevere long term with plain old latihan; add back the spirituality and what are the chances people will join, or if they do join, find it tolerable enough to stay? We probably can't know the answer to that until we see a new organisation in practise.