

Subud-think

By Sahlan Diver

1. Strange Encounters of the Subud Kind

For the first year after my opening in 1972, almost the only contact I had with Subud members was through attending latihan twice a week at the group local to the University where I was a student. The group were everything I had imagined that Subud members should be, a cross-section of people from different classes of society, pleasant and friendly, religiously broad-minded, enthusiastic to talk about their experience of the latihan, without any overt prejudices, and above all straightforward and normal in their thinking. I had not yet encountered anything strange.

After my graduation, I decided to travel about and sample other Subud groups. A group in the south of England were holding a summer garden-party. There were some Subud musicians playing at the event and I was introduced to one of them. I mentioned that I also was a musician and he asked me what sort of music I played. I said that I preferred small ensemble work, classical chamber music or jazz, and had featured as soloist in a number of concerts, upon which he immediately remarked that 'we don't do things like that in Subud' and proceeded to lecture me on how Subud musicians should 'not be soloists, as we needed to be willing to learn how to subsume our ego for the wider good'. This was my first encounter with what I call 'Subud-think', a vague but pervasive pseudo-religious, pseudo-moralistic and pseudo-esoteric sub-text that members are expected to uncritically adopt to demonstrate that they are fully committed Subud members.

The first tenet of 'Subud-think', as I encountered it at that garden party, is the importance of modesty — we should take care that 'we know our place' and don't stand out too much. I believe this is one of the reasons why it is so hard to change anything in Subud. Anyone campaigning for change is most unlikely to have their ideas treated considerately. Much more likely is a knee-jerk reaction that the person is 'suffering from a massive ego', is 'getting too big for their spiritual boots' or is 'merely a self-styled intellectual', to quote three actual phrases that I have seen used against more than one Subud author since we started the Subud Vision web site.

Another thing that 'Subud-thinkers' do is create a distorted and diminished view of the world, on top of which they can then favourably contrast Subud's supposed revelatory approach. In this respect, the musician at the garden party was a perfect example of a Subud-thinker. He was keen to impress on me that as a musician one should not push oneself forward in ensemble playing, as if this were some kind of novel and exclusive Subud discovery. But any reasonably decent player of, say, chamber music or jazz, would already know this — it is the blend and interplay of the voices in the ensemble that makes the performance — they don't need Subud to tell them how to do it.

Some months after the garden party, I moved away from the University and joined a new Subud group. I was invited to a social event. Arriving at the member's house I

apologised that I had caught a streaming cold that day. He said, 'It's not a cold; it's purification!' and I could tell from the way he said it that he really believed that to be the case. Despite the fact that it was Autumn, the weather was appalling, and probably 50% of the population were catching cold and spreading their germs about as a result, I, as a Subud member, must be exempt from that common human condition. Another member whom I knew at that time really believed that traffic lights changed to green as he approached, to assist him when he was on the way to latihan. These two examples of spiritual naivety from the early '70s might seem comical nowadays, but they are illustrative of a more serious and insidious idea — the second tenet of Subud-think, which is that 'matters are being specially arranged for us'. The thinking here is that from the moment we are in Subud, all events take on a special significance, that we are being specially watched over.

The second tenet is another reason why it is so difficult to get a movement towards change in Subud. People say things like 'Subud is a mystery', 'we must be patient', 'we mustn't think we know better than God', 'we must follow God's will', 'we must not try to go faster than God', as if there is a plan there that is going to be worked out despite what we do, or, rather, don't do, with the implication that we are effectively just passive robots who will eventually be awakened from our spiritual doldrums and moved into effective action. This second tenet also draws strength from another distorted world view — that all action is evidence of control by lower forces, and is necessarily detrimental, and therefore it is better not to act, but to wait and see. It is also a distortion of the religious concept of God's will, implying that because we are guided by God, through the latihan, that we can bear no personal blame or responsibility for what we do. This would seem to be in direct contradiction to concepts in religion such as the importance of doing good works, avoiding sin and so on. Yet Subud claims to be compatible with religions and not require its members to adopt any outlook that would be in contradiction to their religion.

After I left college I transferred my enthusiasm for organising student concerts and entertainments to organising and taking part in Subud concerts and entertainments. This culminated in taking twenty-five members to perform a show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1975. During the rehearsal period for the show, we received a long letter which begged us to reconsider the venture and to perform at the upcoming World Congress instead, arguing that it would be much better to go 'out into the world', only after we had 'performed in front of our brother and sisters' and had 'got their love and support behind us'. This letter was an early example of the third and fourth tenets of Subud-think.

The third tenet of Subud-think is the importance to the success of Subud of support through universally shared good-feeling. If we all take care to maintain good feelings then our ventures cannot but be successful, the corollary of this theory being that the reason we have not yet been successful is that we haven't yet progressed enough spiritually to be able to maintain harmony. This tenet is a major obstacle to change for the better in Subud, because whenever anyone raises a problem that should be addressed, it necessarily must create a feeling of irritation, maybe sometimes even of revulsion, that a member should think it acceptable to rock the boat in that way. There are those who prefer to stand their ground, strong and calm in their inner feeling, waiting for the rest of us 'complainers' to catch up. Then, they think, we will all be able to move forward together as one.

Writers on Subud Vision have pointed out the importance of the concept of harmony to Javanese society and have suggested this is why Bapak emphasised the concept so much in his talks. I believe that Bapak's outlook was much wider than merely wishing to foist onto us concepts that were peculiar to his own culture, and that 'harmony' in the sense that Bapak meant it can only be effective in the wider sense of including respect for the other person. However, there is no respect where anyone raising an issue is regarded as being a self-centred complainer, or as supposedly exhibiting personal problems that they need to address. Neither can there be respect if attempts to raise issues in Subud are routinely patronised with an attitude of mild, disengaged amusement, or, alternatively, labelled as a passing anger that will eventually go away if and when the person calms down a bit.

The letter asking us to postpone our proposed Edinburgh Fringe performance also demonstrated the fourth tenet of Subud-think, which is the idea that 'we are not yet ready' to go out into the world. To make a musical analogy, children learning to play a musical instrument are not kept away from performance until they have passed all their grades; they are typically given the opportunity to perform right from their first year of learning. It is only through the experience of performing, getting feedback from audience and peers, that musicians can find out their playing faults and refine their skills. Similarly, becoming more sensitive to the way others see us, being less quick to dismiss outside criticsers as just being 'not ready to receive the latihan' might help us to see a less favourable side of Subud than we are currently prepared to admit.

Finally we come to the fifth tenet of Subud-think, which is the most difficult to deal with and is the root cause of all the others. It is based on the concept that there is such a thing as spiritual 'understanding', a kind of inner wisdom that is deeper than and superior to anything the mind can attain to. I have no problem myself with this concept as such; where I think the problem lies is how Subud members try to attain it in practise. They think there is a battle or opposition: 'mind' versus 'true spirituality', so the way to improve the balance is to diminish the workings of the mind. Their reasoning is fallacious — taking a weight off the left side of a pair of scales may change the balance, but it doesn't make the right side weigh any more, it only makes the left side lighter.

This tenet of Subud-think leads to a disengagement from thinking and a fear of using the mind too much. One hears phrases like 'the restless mind', or that we can't expect to achieve anything in Subud 'just by using the mind'. Might I say for those Subud members, including myself, who are keen on the explanations in Bapak's talks, I believe this fear of the mind demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the explanations that Bapak gave. Bapak warns against 'mixing', the basic concept of which is that members might be tempted to assist the latihan to go faster by mixing other practises into the exercise. It seems to me that outside of the latihan, denying the use of the mind is another kind of mixing: it is an attempt to speed up the effect of the latihan on our lives by becoming equivalent to those people Bapak describes in his talks who go off to a mountain somewhere to quieten themselves in the hope that they will receive something special. Also, Bapak describes the lower forces and the heart and mind as tools we need for this life, but that these tools are out of place, and that the effect of the latihan is to put all these things back in their rightful place within

us. So what is going on in the latihan is a rearranging, not a diminishing. On the contrary I remember a talk where Bapak warned that the lower forces would become stronger within us and more effective as a result of the progress of the latihan. I believe that Ibu Rahayu also made a similar statement in a recent talk.

Does Subud-think have any serious consequences? I believe it does. Subud-think leads to a diminishing of individual responsibility in favour of a higher power that is supposedly going to lead us to do what we need to do. In many this creates an attitude of benign passivity that is both tangible and measurable. I will give some examples.

In her article for Subud Vision, Hassanah Briedis recalls her surprise when asking a chiropractor if he saw any common characteristic with his Subud member patients, and he replied that 'what he noticed was that all his Subud clients had rather flaccid and passive muscles and flesh, and that they seemed — and he searched for the phrase — as if they somehow weren't connected with... what was needed to be effective'.

I heard once of another therapist, very popular among Subud members, who when asked a similar question, said that Subud members all seemed to have in common that they never achieved very much in their lives. Some years ago my then teenage daughters and I were waiting at a railway station. It was summer and there was a Subud conference going on in the area. Some men, who weren't dressed any differently from the other holiday-makers at the station, were getting into the back of a mini-bus. My daughters suddenly started laughing and said, 'They've just got to be Subud members!', and they were right — an unmistakable atmosphere of benign ineffectualness was being exuded. I had a similar experience once when I had to meet a Subud member whom I didn't know in a crowded city street. From two hundred yards away I spotted him with the thought that he wouldn't be offering much more than a lot of empty talk about the spiritual, and experience proved me right. Someone else told me of a group they visited recently where the ladies were all so 'very Soo-bood' that they were like clones of each other.

It shouldn't be like this in Subud, that an exercise supposedly intended for all of mankind should instead cultivate a movement where people very much think and act within it according to a narrow, rigid and predictable pattern. And it bodes ill for the future prospects for the growth of our membership; there are only a limited number of people who will tolerate being fitted into the 'Subud mould'. We need to open out our thinking and attitudes. We need to become less strange.

2. The Subud 'Theory Test'

Authors Lilliana Gibbs and Helen Bailie each wrote an article for the Subud Vision web site and book, where, in their different ways, they pointed out the contradiction between how Subud people try to present Subud to others, and the actual reality of Subud as practised. I have been surprised by the resistance to the points made in these very clear and reasonably expressed articles, and think that maybe it is time to throw down the gauntlet with some more specific challenges.

Helen entitles her article 'Bait and Switch', saying, for example, that we draw the

interest of applicants by telling them Subud is not a religion, but after they have joined they find out more and more how they are expected to adopt the sayings of Bapak as a form of religious instruction. As an exercise I would like to imagine that we don't bait and switch but instead tell people up-front what they will be expected to believe once they become Subud members. Suppose, in fact, that enquirers had to gen up the theory and take a Subud 'theory-test' before moving on to the next stage of fully-fledged applicant — a bit like (in Europe) where one has to get a 90% pass in the 'rules of the road' test before being allowed out on to the road as a learner driver. What would be our Subud 'rules of the road' on which we would test our aspiring applicants?

I suggest the following:

Subud is a spiritual movement, therefore members must understand the rules and beliefs of spirituality (as defined by Subud) and, for their own good and for the good of their fellow Subud members, must not deviate from these rules.

The rules and beliefs are:

- 1) Whatever you believe through your religion or your personal understanding, when interacting with Subud members you must believe the *real* reality, that there is one God and it is *He* who has sent the latihan.
- 2) 'Patience' is key in all things. If a situation in Subud appears to be bad or unsatisfactory, do not try to fix it. Be patient. It will always come right in the end.
- 3) God has a plan. So even if things appear to be bad, that is no fault of Subud members, it must be a part of the master plan. Any deliberate action that attempts to change the situation can only come to grief, to show you that you should not try to be cleverer than God, or go faster than God, or to act without first seeking God's permission.
- 4) Don't think about Subud. Keep your mind quiet on all Subud matters, even matters that appear to be purely practical, and you will eventually come to understand why things are as they are.
- 5) All advertising is propaganda and necessarily suspect. Subud has a better plan. Eventually sufficient of us will exude such a strong spiritual atmosphere that large numbers will join us. So, it is out of place to want to spread Subud by any means other than by diligently attending to one's own latihan.
- 6) If a mistake is made, be quick to 'forgive and forget': 'forgive' so as to maintain harmony; 'forget' so as also to maintain harmony, by avoiding confronting the problem. Don't try to fix it for the benefit of the future. Just leave it to the latihan.
- 7) Constant good feeling is the primary requirement for success.
- 8) Action is just evidence of 'lower forces' and the desire to act should be treated with caution.
- 9) I am sure this list could be made much longer and welcome suggestions in

the feedback to this article. Normally we don't change articles after publication, but I am hoping our publications editor will make an exception and allow this list to be grown post-publication.

Now I am not saying that it is wrong if an individual Subud member happens to believe some or all of the above. Saying that we are not allowed to have such beliefs in Subud would be just as wrong as saying the opposite, that members *must* adopt these beliefs. What I am asking is that we acknowledge these things for what they are, spiritual ideas which are not universally shared, and which we are in no position to insist are part of Subud, since in Subud we claim that we have no teaching and that the latihan will lead us to our own tailor-made understanding and guidance.

So if someone says something critical about Subud, or makes a strongly felt suggestion for improvement, we should not turn away in embarrassment as if they had let off a bad smell or done something unclean. There are no sacred principles in Subud to be broken by discussion and debate. There is no theory or code of behaviour to be measured against with a pass or fail grade.

3. The Danger of Bapak's Talks

In this article, I am not trying to construct a solid theory about how Subud members think, nor do I wish to tar all Subud members with the same brush. However, I do suggest that, for a movement that claims not to have a teaching, there is more than a coincidental sharing of specific ideas relating to spiritual concepts.

So where do these ideas come from? Subud has had certain primary influences, in particular the influence in the 1950s of the high proportion of founding members who were in the Gurdjieff movement, later the influence of Javanese culture (*selamatans*, name changes, rice fasts, and so on) and then the influence of Islam through the enthusiasm of many members who adopted that faith, even if temporarily. However the prime influence on Subud thinking must surely be the talks of Bapak.

The pros and cons of Bapak's talks have been extensively discussed on the Subud Vision web site, but I believe there is one disadvantage of Bapak's talks that has not been mentioned. (I speak as an enthusiast for the talks, so I am not criticising the talks as such.) Where I think there is a problem can be summed up by the phrase 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. To put it bluntly, people get the wrong idea about what Bapak is saying, weave a convenient, nice-sounding theory around their misunderstanding, and if sufficient of them 'just don't get it' the new theory enters the popular culture and understanding of Subud members as if it were an incontrovertible spiritual fact.

As an example, let's take the idea popular in Subud that we must be patient in all things. In his talks, Bapak certainly warned that the progress of the latihan could be slow and that we should not try to speed up our spiritual progress; it should be allowed to proceed at its right pace. But this idea has been erroneously carried sideways by Subud members to matters relating to the Subud organisation — if something is wrong in Subud we should not fix it, but wait and it will work out. Unfortunately, such misunderstandings do not just have one cause. If they did they would be much easier to correct. There is another idea going around, that Subud

members are guided how to act in Subud, like the way they are guided in the latihan. If we are guided how to act in Subud, then being a Subud member must be just like doing latihan all the time: in other words, God tells us what to do and we just follow. So there can be no issues of members organising matters badly; it's just all part of a big continuous, collective latihan experience which we must passively follow and wait for it to work its magic.

The validity of such concepts can be seriously challenged by pointing out where they are muddled, muddied, contradictory, insufficiently thought through, or just plain incorrect. Unfortunately they are difficult to challenge in practise because Subud-thinkers hold on to the belief that they are not using the mind at all, that the ideas that they have picked up through contact with Subud are in fact evidence of a growing deeper spirituality. As one of our editors commented *"It's all thinking, even the anti-thinking. You can't get away from thinking, so you may as well do it properly"*. It is about time we started to identify Subud-think for what it is —lightweight thought, masquerading as deep understanding.