

Ten Misconceptions About Subud Enterprise

By Sahlan Diver

From the early 1970s onwards, almost every talk that Bapak gave included a section on enterprise. Typically Bapak would start by talking about spiritual matters and then move on to talking about enterprise for the latter half of his talk. There are writers on Subud Vision who argue that, since Bapak advised us that we would find our own truth and guidance through the latihan, we should not feel obliged to follow anything Bapak said. While I fully agree with such sentiments, at the same time might it not be a little arrogant or even foolish to dismiss out of hand a subject that Bapak gave such priority to over the last twenty years of his life?

Why did Bapak encourage Subud members to get involved in enterprise? I believe some of the reasons are very well summed up by Marcus Bolt's recent article on the subject: '(1) Enterprise would give us something to engage our hearts and minds in order to stop us thinking and fantasising about the spiritual. (2) Enterprise would provide a structure through which we could put into practice...the reality of what we were being shown. (3) If members were to discover their inner talent, they could more easily find expression for it...through Subud enterprise. (4) Once successful, we would have the [money] to fund...our latihan premises and national centres,...schools, homes for the elderly, hospitals and other social work projects...[and] we would be in a position to financially support cultural projects as members' true inner culture came to life.' [1]

It is interesting that Marcus mentions inner talent development in his list. What should be noted is that the practise of 'testing one's inner talent' only came into vogue some years after Bapak started to push the idea of enterprise. That is not to say that Bapak wasn't testing talents early on – a member who had been in Cilandak in 1970 told me how he was present when Bapak tested a group of men, what they were doing with their lives and what they should have done. He told me how it was notable that in every case what they apparently *should* have done was always big stuff – it was never something trivial. For example, Bapak told one man that 'you should have built bridges'. Similarly, I remember Bapak bringing the house down at a talk in England when he told one member, a likeable but quiet and very self-effacing man, that he should have been a singer, and, if he had, he would have been, in Bapak's words, 'more popular than Elvis Prez'. A more unlikely candidate for a rival to Elvis Presley was hard to imagine.

The theme that seems to run through both Bapak's exhortation to do enterprise, and the practise of talent testing, is that of *opportunity* – opportunity to develop our lives, opportunity to develop Subud. More than that, it is possible to interpret Bapak's advice as containing a much stronger message: that if, in fact, we didn't put the lower forces to work, engage our hearts and minds, and demonstrate the spiritual reality of Subud through endeavours that collectively showed an active social responsibility, Subud would not in fact survive and would eventually die out. Some might say that this has already to all intents and purposes occurred – Subud members are showing that they are content that Subud should continue forever in its current state as a benign but mainly ineffectual and very minor spiritual movement.

The collapse of the larger enterprise projects initiated by Bapak is well known, though it is debatable whether members are well informed as to the true reasons behind each failure. It is not difficult to appreciate the demoralising effect of these failures and the weakening of our ability to revive the enterprise idea, due to the financial resources consumed. However, I believe there is another obstacle to the idea of

enterprise being revived and that is that there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings as to the nature of what enterprise should be in Subud. This article seeks to address those misconceptions. In listing them below I am not suggesting that all Subud members hold on to all of these misconceptions; I am merely addressing the more common misconceptions that I have heard expressed over the years on different occasions by different people.

1) Every Subud member should do enterprise.

This clearly contradicts the idea of following one's inner talent. Suppose one's talent is as a heart surgeon. It's not really possible to make an enterprise out of that. One could stretch the point and say the heart surgeon should team up with Subud members with business ability and start a private hospital, but even if we do allow reality to be superseded by fantasy for a moment, it's still not as simple as that. In order to make a business out of a talent, one has to have an appreciation and understanding of business. Not everyone has that. Take an example near to that of our heart surgeon: cosmetic surgery. Some cosmetic surgeons do very nicely for themselves nowadays running their own private clinics; others would not like that environment at all, and are much happier working in a public hospital where they can concentrate on surgery pure and simple, without any competitive commercial considerations to take care of. I have given one example. I am sure the reader will have no trouble thinking of any number of such examples. And of course there are also the many talents that don't lend themselves to enterprise at all. Social workers, nurses, teachers, politicians, public servants of all kinds need to work in an existing structure.

2) A Subud enterprise is not a 'Subud enterprise' unless it is run by Subud.

True if taken as a simple tautology, but in practise not true. In many countries Subud is constituted as a charity and may therefore be prevented by law from speculating its funds in business ventures. In countries where the Subud organisation does not have this restriction, it is nevertheless inadvisable that our committee officials, who tend to be in the main short term volunteers, should be made responsible for overseeing the running of business, which requires long-term dedication and, usually, specialist knowledge of the field to be successful.

3) A Subud Enterprise is not a Subud Enterprise unless it only or mainly employs Subud members.

In the early days of enterprise it was commonplace to think that unless an enterprise was almost entirely constituted of Subud members, the 'lower forces' brought in by outsiders would somehow devalue the quality of the endeavour. I am not saying that, if all other factors were completely right in an enterprise, the fact that the participants were all latihan practitioners mightn't provide some additional bonus, but clearly the most important thing in any business is to first try to get the best people one can for the job. There are stories of totally unsuitable people being employed by enterprises just because they were Subud members, and having, as would be expected, a detrimental effect as a result.

I said that it was once 'commonplace' to think an enterprise should employ mainly Subud members. However, there were some who, probably as a result of experience, took the opposite view. When Bapak was visiting Howard Denton's impressive chain of restaurants in Edinburgh in 1972, he asked whether any Subud members were employed there. 'Good Heaven's no, Bapak!' was Howard's reply.

4) A Subud enterprise is not a Subud enterprise unless all the directors are Subud members.

Suppose we accept that the staff of an enterprise need to be chosen on the basis of suitability, regardless of whether they are Subud members or not, then what about the people in control, the directors? Should they all be Subud members? A counter-example can be found in Luthfi O'Meagher's *The Governance of Anugraha*. Luthfi describes incidents where the wise counsel and experience of the licensed insolvency practitioner, John Pitman, who was a director of Anugraha but not a Subud member, was crucial to the continued survival of the venture. John Pitman is described by Luthfi as a man of great integrity, in contrast to whom some of the Subud people described in the same document come out as of rather dubious quality.

In past years it was thought good to have all the directors in Subud, because problems could be resolved through testing. This makes sense only if one can justify the use of testing in a business venture, a practice which has been thrown into disrepute through many instances of abuse.

5) There is a difference between a 'Subud enterprise' and an 'enterprise of a Subud member'.

This one is a classic from the 1970s. I remember people having intense discussions on this point. The implication is that the latter activity is a second rate activity motivated purely by an individual's self-interest, compared to the former which has some implicit higher purpose that can be seen to shine through.

In my opinion the wish to make this distinction is another example of Subud members wanting to stick Subud quality labels on things, similar to the way nowadays you can't just have a concert, it has to be a 'SICA' concert, even though the concert may not actually have been officially organised by S.I.C.A. but merely by some individuals who happen to be Subud members.

It would be better if we judged any activity in Subud, including the enterprise activities of members, on the actual quality demonstrated by the venture, not on some presupposition about what might constitute suitable spiritual credentials.

6) Subud enterprises cannot work because Subud members are too individualistic.

This is one of those ideas that rolls off the tongue easily, but doesn't stand up at all to close examination. The word 'individualistic' is used with its negative connotation of 'uncooperative'. I would question that Subud members are always so 'individualistic' in this sense. One doesn't have to look further than many of the inadequately prepared, badly run and over-long committee meetings in Subud to see that Subud members can actually exhibit quite an exceptional degree of tolerance and acceptance.

Another connotation of the word 'individualistic' is having a strong sense of one's worth and special abilities, which the latihan tends to strengthen. However, individuality in this sense is not a bad quality in business. It is a very good quality. One needs people of ability who are not afraid to speak out if they believe a proposed course of action is wrong. And individuality does not mean that a person cannot co-operate with others. On the contrary, in a well-managed team, the individuality of each member will be valued and cultivated for its special contribution to the good of the whole venture.

7) Enterprises will not succeed, because they were just Bapak's way of giving us a means to confront our faults and learn something.

This is a similar argument to when people say we don't need to criticise what is wrong with Subud, we should just leave it be, because it's all part of a 'learning process'. But surely, the proof that we have learnt something, whether it be about a business mistake in enterprise, or a personal mistake in the context of our Subud relationships, is that we can demonstrate an ability to put right the wrong, and not go on repeating the same mistake in the future. If we are not prepared to confront the mistake, to consider what went wrong and why, to show a willingness and concern to put the thing right, – if we just bumble on in some kind of self-absolving spiritual fog – how are we going to learn?

If Bapak did in fact encourage enterprises so we could face our faults, that does not imply that enterprises can never succeed. On the contrary one would expect the evidence that this process was of benefit would be that eventually at least some would show success. And consider this, there are plenty of people outside of Subud who are successful in business – is this because they have worked through their faults or for some other reason? The logic that equates success in business with having worked through one's faults could be taken to imply we should all give up the latihan because there are lots of people outside of Subud who are very successful, so perhaps one can get through one's faults quicker by *not* doing the latihan.

Isn't the whole idea a bit strange anyway? People in business usually get better at it because they learn from their business mistakes, not because they have cured their personal faults. I suggest the idea arises out of other misconceptions mentioned in this article: that enterprises should be staffed wholly by Subud members, that they need to sacrifice their individuality in order to co-operate harmoniously, and that this harmony in itself will be sufficient to guarantee success, regardless of any of the other factors which normally determine whether a business will be successful or not.

8) Subud enterprises have to be very large undertakings. Small enterprise is not significant enough to be worth doing.

As another writer on Subud Vision [2] has pointed out, many of today's largest companies started out as small affairs and grew to be mega-corporations, (Motorola and Hewlett-Packard, for example, both started out in home garages), and where businesses do start big, it is usually because they are financed and guided by already successful and experienced corporations or individuals.

In contrast, the idea has been fostered in Subud that we, who have little or no experience, must necessarily aim big and start big in order to make significant money. This idea came straight from Bapak, of course. It was he who suggested the big projects, the Bank, S.Widjojo, Anugraha, Kalimantan gold mining. Did Bapak perhaps foresee that there would be insufficient enthusiasm among Subud members for local, small-scale enterprise, and that therefore the only hope for creating funds to assist Subud's growth was to create a very small number of high-value enterprises instead?

9) Subud enterprise is guided by God and it is probably not the right time for enterprise to be successful.

For those members who set great store by what Bapak says in his talks, I offer this quote about the 'right time' idea:

Do not have a feeling of dreaming about something as if you are depending

on it or waiting for it. 'Oh later when the right time comes everything will be easy.' There is no such thing as a time when everything is easy. No. That has to be made by man himself. That is why you must make your own time. Make it yourself. In other words, make your good time come. If it is not good then make it good. [Dec. 6th, 1981, Cilandak]

The above is not the only talk where Bapak refers to 'the right time'. I remember more than one talk where he used the phrase 'the right time is now'.

I would like to digress here to describe an idea, which is relevant and which I believe has been commonplace among many members. I will call it the 'double-whammy'[3] theory of *kejiwaan* benefit: we not only get the latihan; we get God's special guidance and protection as a bonus.

In a Subud Vision article, Rosalind Priestley questions the morality and advisability of the pressure put on members to invest in the big Subud enterprises.[4] I can imagine authors who make criticisms of the large enterprise concept being told that they have missed the point, that these enterprises were God's will, and therefore done in the right way and with the right attitude they would have the special protection of the Almighty.

The only problem with this theory is that one can imagine that all the small investors who over-stretched themselves to support Bapak's projects very much *did* have the right attitude. According to some Subud members' writings, this goodwill was exploited by a few with wrong attitudes, hence the failure of Anugraha and the difficulties over Widjojo. So it seems that the people with the right attitude, the ones who lost their money, contrary to the earlier theory, actually get punished rather than rewarded, and the minority with the wrong attitude are allowed to get the upper hand. So much for the Almighty's special protection!

Rosalind's article also mentions that she was too embarrassed to tell friends and family that she and her husband had invested in Bapak's projects, because it was like admitting one had fallen under the power of some sleazy televangelist. The other night, I was listening to such a televangelist on a Sky channel, and the testimonials from his converts. I was trying to figure out what I didn't like about it. It's this: you never hear one of these converts say, 'Formerly I was a selfish person, but now I go to a shelter for the homeless each week and help out in the kitchen there'; it's always stuff like 'I believed in Jesus and I got a new car and a new house – it was a miracle!'

I am not implying that the investors in Anugraha and other projects were investing for selfish reasons. I don't believe that any of them expected their money to be lost, but I do believe there were a large proportion who thought of it as a gift rather than an investment – what mattered to them above all was that they could help the projects to be successful. What I do criticise is the expectation that, despite the risks, these projects had a special dispensation from the Almighty, and therefore ultimately could not fail.

I suggest that the idea of God's special protection or direction is mistaken. The guidance is simply there in the latihan, but it is up to us to put that into practise. We should not abdicate our responsibility to deal with matters of the world responsibly, carefully and with the utmost of our intelligence and creativity. For example, between 1986 and 1989, Anugraha made a slow and difficult recovery from almost impossible circumstances. Then within a year it had collapsed. Was this because Almighty God had changed his mind and withdrawn his special protection? The reasons are surely much more mundane. Luthfi O'Meagher, the managing director between 1986 and 1989, had the right combination of dedication, intelligence, experience and creativity

to lead the management team forward. After Subud members decided to fire him in 1989, there was no available replacement person with comparable qualities. No *kejiwaan* explanation for the subsequent failure is necessary; even our bankers predicted it.[5]

10) Enterprises fail because members have too much self-interest.

In my opinion this idea, which sounds pious, represents instead a kind of arrogance, albeit maybe an arrogance unintentionally born of ignorance rather than deliberately born of pride. Outside of Subud, businesses fail through any combination of all sorts of well-known reasons; bad cash-flow, under-capitalisation, bad decisions, bad luck, bad advice, bad management, incompetent staff, lack of goodwill, flawed product, poor service, fraud perpetrated on or by the business, recession, insufficient marketing, inferior technology, smarter competitors, not paying taxes, and so on and so on. But Subud businesses (apparently) do not fail for any of these reasons; they fail for one reason only: 'that we have too much self-interest'. We seem to be saying that if we cure this one fault, everything else will be easy, that we in Subud are above all the natural laws of the business world, against which we have some kind of magic protection – we are special, we have only one thing we need to get right.

Unless we can come up with actual proof that, in every case of failure, self-interest was the main factor, we are effectively making a circular argument: enterprises fail because of self-interest; such and such an enterprise failed, therefore the failure must have been due to self-interest. In practise also, I find the suggestion unconvincing. I knew some of the people who were the first Anugraha directors, and I can imagine them working flat out and with great dedication to fulfil what they would have regarded as Bapak's mission. Much more likely that they failed through simple lack of experience in the field. These people were chosen by Bapak. It seems unlikely he would have chosen people whose primary motivation was self-interest.

So what then is the definition of a Subud Enterprise? I would suggest there is no such thing as a Subud Enterprise. There would be such a thing if Subud, the organisation, were responsible for owning and running enterprises, but that is not likely to happen, neither is it desirable. What we can have instead are businesses which can be small or large, a one-man operation or employing many people, with one, some or all of the employees being Subud members. What is important is not the precise form, not the labels we stick on, but the activity of enterprise itself, undertaken by those members with the talent and opportunity to do so, but without intruding on the consciences or the funds of those who have no wish to be involved.

It is clear from Bapak's talks that he wanted to activate Subud members, to give them a feeling of responsibility for developing their lives according to their talents, and also, since very little can be done in this world without money, it would be highly desirable if some at least members could become successful in business enterprise and hopefully help strengthen Subud materially as well. However, during the initial editing of this article, one of the editors made a remark to the effect: 'Is that really all there is to enterprise; is the concept really as unsurprising as that?' Fair comment. Was Bapak really just promoting something so very ordinary? The answer lies in his suggestion that, once established, an enterprise should dedicate 25% of its profits after reserves for charitable purposes. This is a substantial percentage, and much more than businesses usually donate to charity. Bapak once stated this definition of social justice: 'What I have is yours.' My understanding is that he wanted Subud to be a prime mover in a new kind of social justice where spiritual people were not afraid to

get involved in money making, but where they dedicated a high proportion of the created wealth to projects aimed at improving the lot of their fellow man. This was not the same as expecting people to give alms from their personal wealth. What was new was the potential to create a much bigger impact through the profit from business.

Unfortunately, in Subud, we are often not satisfied for things to be simply of this world. We try to complicate what we do by imagining it has a special 'spiritual' dimension. So it's not enough to just start enterprises, find out how to make money, then donate 25% of profits to charity, we want there to be a special thing called 'Subud Enterprise', with its own special rules and qualities to talk about. Similarly it must be twenty years since I've heard anyone in Subud use the word 'culture'. For us it's no longer culture, it has to be our own special thing, which we call 'SICA' (the word is only an abbreviation, for heaven's sake!).

We can do better. We have done better. Very early on after Subud came to the West, members started to undertake charitable projects. No spiritual propaganda, no flag-waving, no special concepts, just straightforward professionalism and getting on with the job, just like any other sincere and committed charitable organisation. These projects later networked through the umbrella organisation, Susila Dharma. At the Spokane Congress members were treated to a moving two-hour presentation by Susila Dharma of project after project, in every continent, helping people in desperate circumstances. If only Subud enterprise had been able to demonstrate a similar steady growth and success from modest beginnings. Then articles like this one would not need to be written.

Notes:

1. Marcus Bolt, 'Does the Concept "Enterprise" Still Have Legs?' on Subud Vision.
2. Ragnar Lystad, 'Why Did It Go Wrong?' on Subud Vision.
3. An American phrase, hijacked in the UK's 1992 election campaign. A poster to undermine the opposition party contained the text, 'Labour's Double Whammy: More Taxes *and* Higher Prices.
4. Rosalind Priestley, 'The Problems with Enterprise' on Subud Vision.
5. Sahlan Diver, 'Trial By Feelings', on Subud Vision.