

# Mind, Fiend or Friend

By Stefan Freedman

## PART 1 Thinking about Thinking

*'Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream'[1]*

In my teens, much of people's 'normal' conversation struck me as superficial: a babbling brook of words filling every crack leading to the deeper dimensions of our being. I did, however, love thinking and reading about spiritual things and psychology, which is how I discovered (in a London library in 1968) John Bennett's *A Spiritual Psychology*, then *Concerning Subud*. Two years later I joined Subud.

As a child and a teenager I was plagued by obsessive imaginings. I lived in my head, often feeling disconnected with the rest of my body! One of the first actions of the latihan on me was whirling. I had the impression that a turmoil of thoughts and emotions were being spun out of me and I relished these periods of relief from the incessant mental clamour. I've since learned that this spin-drier experience in latihan is quite common for intellectual types!

Later I read Bapak's words in *Susila Budhi Dharma* (Rofé's translation, p 49):

One must avoid paying undue attention to the mind, which is one of the chief obstacles on the path towards Self realisation.... The nature of the mind is to pursue falsehoods, and to delight in theorising and vain imaginations beyond the limits of fact.

This made perfect sense in the light of my own experience and I remember coming up with a flippant alternative to Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' and scrawling it alongside other graffiti on a toilet door at my University: *'I think therefore I stink!'*

Despite this I continued with my university course in Social Anthropology, and went on to do post-grad teacher training. I found that channelling my mind into reading, writing and learning was better than leaving it unfocussed, but I also had the sense that my intelligence and lively imagination were tools I could eventually master and put to good use.

This understanding was supported by what I read in *Susila Budhi Dharma*. There was clear advice to avoid paying undue attention to our thoughts. But this was explicitly for during the latihan. What Bapak received about developing the intellect outside the latihan exercise was entirely different:

Mental development is by no means harmful. Rather should a maximum of intellectual accomplishments be sought, provided that they can truly be utilised to serve the self, as a being submitting to the Divine Will [2] and also serve the communal good. The individual will thus attain to the grade of those whose existence can influence social trends. Such is the value of intellect. The mind can be used as an instrument for the development of all arts and sciences of value to humanity. These can make possible the establishment of a Golden Age, peaceful and contented social conditions.

Such being the value of scholastic knowledge, it should be rather sought than abandoned, since it is required to perfect both the individual and the society. It should be able to serve the Self efficiently. An efficient servant is more valuable than one who is stupid. (from *Susila Budhi Dharma*, translation by Rofé, 'Pangkur' pp 52 - 53, stanzas 8, 9 and 10)

Here the cultivated mind is depicted as a sine qua non for fostering harmony and justice in society. Yet I notice that many of my Subud friends seem to have become allergic to the 'heaviness' of serious reading or methodical thinking and planning. In extreme cases they even find it difficult to make ordinary daily decisions or to take any initiatives — instead always hoping to feel inwardly what is right. They find it hard to concentrate for long or to settle at a job.

Personal testing has proved extremely useful to me, but I reserve it for special, important or insoluble situations. But for some Subud members who are thinking-averse, testing seems to lead into a downward spiral of dependence. Low confidence makes them want to test every small, practical decision. And since testing is better suited for spiritual/feeling matters than for practical questions, results are often unclear and they end up always waiting for the next fix of testing.

Non-Subud people, on the other hand, are more likely to ask for expert advice, to read up on things and to take training courses. They develop courage and resilience by experimenting, learning both from failure and from success.

In the early days of Subud, especially when explaining Subud to those doing the Gurdjieff Work, I can see why Bapak wanted to make it crystal clear that the latihan did not involve mental effort or concentration. But he often emphasised the need for balance between spiritual and practical development. An anti-thinking culture was never recommended as a complete approach to living.

Unfortunately we seem to have taken in only half of what Bapak was saying. This easily leads to a fatalistic attitude ('I suppose indications about work and money will come my way when the time is right') with a vague hope that — if we are patient and have faith — God will one day call round with the groceries, cook dinner, empty the bin and put money in the bank.

There may well be real pitfalls in having a hyperactive mind. But for getting things done — and this applies equally to organising our Subud association — imaginative and analytical thinking and goal-setting are all vital for survival. Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream during latihan. But when not in latihan, develop an agile, well-informed noggin for organising all aspects of life.

## **PART 2 Unthinkable Thoughts**

*It's unhelpful to think about spiritual things. This will impede progress!*

This is another idea often voiced in Subud circles. It clearly applies during the latihan exercise, but should it also apply outside of it?

My work (with my wife, Bethan) introducing circle dances to groups of adults around the world has given me occasions to talk in depth with all kinds of people. Because of the inclusive, holistic and therapeutic aspects of our work — especially during the residential weeks we host and facilitate — the talk has often touched on spiritual matters.

In the course of thirty years of group-work with many thousands of people, I'm fortunate to have had hundreds of far-ranging and fascinating conversations, often including the topic of Subud, with agnostics, pagans, Wiccans, Druze Arabs, Hassidic Jews, Mevlevi ('Whirling') Dervishes, Taoists, New Agers, Yoga adepts, naturists, animists, meditators, Quakers, Sufis, people into the native American Medicine Wheel and sweat lodges, people who study 'deep ecology', those into Unity Consciousness or enlightenment, healers and 'urban shamans'. Some of the most

interesting and open-minded exchanges have been with atheists, including Buddhists (who in general do not believe in God or worship). There are others who cannot be pigeonholed, who I think of as 'spiritual freelancers', as they are inspired by various spiritual and ethical sources, such as the Dalai Lama, but do not want to label themselves in terms of one specific religion or group.

It was amusing really that after twelve years as a fairly 'straight' Subud member, rather nervous about mixing, my work obliged me to revive the interest in spiritual subjects which had originally brought me to Subud. In listening to others I learned better how to draw out threads from my latihan experience that would enable me to connect with people coming from spiritual backgrounds very different from my own. (I grew up in a Jewish home but my maternal grandmother was a spiritualist.)

I was later drawn to take a little training in Interfaith facilitation which has added to my resources in this area.

Bapak's receiving reinforces what many seers and mystics have described: the mind is just an instrument and is not designed to perceive or understand the soul's journey.

But I believe they are talking about the 'computer function' of the brain. In its higher functions the mind is far more than a calculating machine. Studies show, for example, that the right side of the brain (often the less dominant side) is capable of grasping new ideas holistically and intuitively, of appreciating music, of feeling empathy with other people or with animals, of integrating concepts with emotions, and of being fully activated during meditative states.[3]

Maybe the mind cannot completely fathom the spiritual realm, but that does not mean it is just a burden or a mechanical tool. We use the mind in our approach to the many areas of enquiry which add to our understanding of what it is to be fully human. These include psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, world religions, social justice, happiness and wellbeing, conflict transformation, holism and alternative approaches to health, music, dance, communication, peace-building. For me, all of these marry the 'spiritual' and 'practical' realms and engage my intuition ('receiving'), emotions, imagination and my inquisitive mind, working in concert.

What I'm picturing now is more like a 'bodymind',[4] in which the mind is becoming integrated with all of my being. My thinking is an essential part of my ethical compass, my approach to wholeness, my vision and my spirituality.

Many Subud people (though perhaps not you) view the mind as a dangerous tool which can only inhibit, and never help, our spiritual journey. This shrinks the world, and excludes a wealth of far-reaching enquiry and spiritual wisdom that can be apprehended through non-Subud thinkers, books, courses etc. This self-blinkering happened to me for twelve years.

I see this as a pity, not only because of what people are missing. It is a pity also because a wide-ranging interest makes it so much easier to engage with people from diverse backgrounds. It helps when attempting to describe the latihan's liberating qualities in terms meaningful to (say) a Hindu, a Pagan or an atheist. Talking about 'the One Almighty God' to a Hindu polytheist will alienate them. Using the word 'submission' with a Pagan, or describing latihan as 'worship' to an atheist will result in instant disconnect. Isn't it obvious once you think about it? So when our mind is curious and switched on, we can witness and affirm others with respect and understanding in their desire to encounter a direct source of inner development.

Many helpers do a wonderful job, are sensitive and supportive and 'receive' what to

say to enquirers. I am in awe of all the dedicated work, time and care that has been freely and generously given over the last fifty years. At the same time I notice that, unintentionally, we have developed a group language with a particular resonance or, we might say, bias. If there are helpers who are not inclined to study diversity, that's okay. The main thing is to listen really well, to accept and to allow people to use their own words and spiritual concepts as they approach the great unfolding journey.

In the Subud I dream of, I would no longer have to feel embarrassed by Subud's unwritten assumptions that to enquirers often look like required beliefs or teachings. If helpers listened attentively, with respect for the views of others, I'd be able to recommend Subud wholeheartedly. I'd love to be able to say to my worldwide network of associates, 'Why not check out the latihan? It's a simple practice which is found by many to satisfy their thirst for the spiritual.'

Then, as hosts of Subud, we would become accustomed to hearing the fascinating diversity of language and images people use to allude to their spiritual journey: 'Source'/mystical union/opening up and letting go/Holy Ghost/nonduality etc. At the same time we would appreciate that a person's own words have a history and are charged with meaning for them, while other words may have a distancing effect. This way we would develop a respectful approach and learn on the job how to accommodate and include others.

Thinking the unthinkable is doable. Thinking about spiritual matters (not obsessing!) is highly useful. After some years of practising the latihan we need to be able to assess our own latihan journey. What changes have we undergone? What benefits have we received? We need a switched on mind to help us communicate about the latihan with others, both face-to-face, and online, both inside Subud and in the outside world.

Think where this could take us!

**Notes:**

1. '60s Lyrics by Lennon & McCartney from the song, 'Tomorrow Never Knows'.
2. For those who are uncomfortable with the phrase 'as a being submitting to the Divine Will', a secular or Buddhist alternative might be, 'in harmony with inner-wisdom'.
3. Read for example, <http://painting.about.com/library/blpaint/blrightbraintable.htm>
4. See for example, <http://mindbodyresearchandeducation.blogspot.com/>