

Peace and Subud

By Stefan Freedman

“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” (Mahatma Gandhi)

I was always a skilled conflict avoider. Anything for peace and quiet. Bending gracefully like a willow, to avoid snapping, our hero would soothe ruffled egos and smooth over disputes. But later on I noticed how conflicts, after being soothed, tend to flare up again.

I became actively interested in conflict resolution and studied an approach called Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I began to see that conflict is not in itself “bad”. It’s an authentic expression of unmet needs. What is regrettable is when the needs remain unmet. Smoothing things over can be counterproductive: a way of avoiding dealing with vital issues. It can be infuriating if your burning concerns are met with “There, there, don’t get worked up!” Conflicts need to be heard, and what is useful is to have calm, impartial facilitation when difficult issues are being discussed.

I began to wonder if Subud members might play an active role in mediation and perhaps even in peace talks. Is it possible that the latihan’s potential to help restore harmony between individuals could make some real difference on a societal level? One of the most beautiful things is to see alienated people come together, in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

One occasion that comes to mind is when Bethan (my wife) and I were invited to teach in Belgium. My dance choreography has won followers among both Flemish and French speakers in Belgium, and dance teachers with their students came from North and South to the venue, which we had deliberately chosen because it was central. Historically the two cultures are at loggerheads, and hold prejudices about one another. They still don’t mix together easily and political power struggles continue.

As expected, the day began with the two language groups staying in two distinct camps. Something as simple as shared enjoyment of music and dance, presented in a light-hearted and inclusive atmosphere, was able to help soften barriers, so that by lunchtime participants began sharing food and having conversations across the divide. The atmosphere became palpably more relaxed, and faces that had appeared stern and anxious were creasing with smiles. On the follow-up visit, a year later, it seemed almost as if they were a single unfragmented group. In my work with international groups, and likewise at Subud world congresses, I have seen many small but significant instances of barriers dissolving.

“We must learn to be the peace we want to create.” (Mahatma Gandhi)

The generally acknowledged effect of the latihan has three features of relevance:

- releasing traumas
- quietening inflamed feelings
- restoring connectedness with one another

I’m not claiming that existing approaches to peace processes are any less valuable. I’m saying that Subud’s contribution could be added to these.

Subud members’ potential to support conflict resolution processes will, of course, need to be developed step by step, in a well-founded and practical way.

Over a period of time, we might hope to gain a reputation for helping resolve disputes of all kinds. This will require us to gain skills in areas such as conflict resolution, mediation and counselling.

In addition the judicious use of testing could help to unlock entrenched conflicts. When a seeming impasse is reached, Subud facilitators would be able to test a question such as, “How could I best support a useful outcome to this dilemma?”

The primary aim of a peace initiative is of course to benefit others, but there may be these reciprocal benefits for Subud:

- a) Engaging in mediation and peace work gives us an additional avenue for sharing our resources and being less inward-looking.
- b) This is the kind of “spirituality in practice” that many people are looking for, and could provide a new way for people to discover Subud.

The seed corn already exists, as we have begun a Subud peace network, informally linking members who have an interest in this area. The establishment of a Subud peace foundation would be a step forward. The aim would be to support, co-ordinate and help to find funding for relevant training, conferences and projects. This could be loosely modelled on the way that Susila Dharma links our charitable initiatives around the globe.

One of the things Subud does extremely well as a group is to set up and run international congresses. I propose that those interested in this theme initiate and spearhead a small peace and conflict resolution symposium for both Subud and non-Subud participants. If successful this could be a blueprint for bigger and more globally significant events.

But isn't this all wildly optimistic? A critic might say that Subud groups aren't exactly paragons of peace and harmony. I agree. Although I'm fortunate to have been a part of several very supportive groups, I'm aware that others have continuing unresolved issues. But it is just those conflict-resolving skills I would like us to develop that would also be of potential benefit to Subud groups experiencing discord. We can't wait around for a time when all Subud members and groups are in harmony. This will never come about because in every spiritual group there are, and always will be, people who don't seem to be the least bit transformed by their practice, while others begin to reflect the integrating power of sincere meditation, prayer or—according to my experience—latihan. This fact of life doesn't invalidate the potential for some practitioners of a transformational approach, such as Subud, to pool resources with a positive purpose and to develop something of worth.

It was suggested to me that if a member of the public came across the SubudVision web site they might find it hard to reconcile items which mention our unresolved disputes with a “seemingly naïve” item about Subud and peace. But if we're letting people see the whole picture including our dirty linen, why hide a member's hopes and aspirations?

I am not talking pie-in-the-sky ideas here, like Subud involved in big front-line negotiations. With imagination one can come up with achievable contributions that Subud could make to peace promotion. Just to give two examples of small but effective initiatives outside of Subud: (1) There is a project called “Windows For Peace” which produces a newspaper in Arabic and Hebrew written by Palestinian and Israeli children, and arranges meetings between them and their families. (2) There is a different type of “peace conference” which is involved in the groundwork of bridge-building, and tries to counteract the prevailing culture of blame

that is so often the cause of front-line agreements breaking down later on.□□I'd like to hear if the prospect of a Subud peace initiative inspires any other Subud members. Contact me: stefan@freedmans.fsbusiness.co.uk

“We look forward to the time when the power of love will replace the love of power.”
(William Gladstone)