

The Mystery of the Vanishing Applicants

By Stefan Freedman

'Welcome. What's your name?'

'Trish.'

'I'm Susila.'

'OK if I call you Sue for short?'

'I prefer Susila. Actually it's a shortened form of Susilawati.'

'Wow! Is that African?'

'Indonesian.'

'Are you...'

'Long story. Anyway, tell me how you heard about Subud?'

'From the man who smashed into the back of my car.'

'No! Seriously?'

'We'd exchanged insurance details and were waiting for the tow truck to come and tow the cars. He was so sweet and apologetic saying he sometimes feels a bit unfocussed after *latihan*. I asked what was latihan and he told me it's a spiritual awakening which doesn't require faith or study. And that sounds great, so here I am.'

'The car incident didn't put you off?'

'Well it's strange, but I notice that when crazy things happen to me, when my routine's thrown out, sometimes I stumble onto the next step on my spiritual journey.'

'Same here. God has funny ways of guiding us.'

'Well I don't actually believe in a personal God, but sometimes I experience a kind of serendipity which seems to nudge me in useful directions. That's why I'm here. So what happens now?'

'Well, if you're interested we'll ask you to sign a form and that begins a three month application period.'

'Three months seems a long time.'

'Well, it's a time during which you can get to know more about Subud.'

'What's to know? Isn't it simply something to be experienced?'

'But we need to see that an applicant is sincere....'

'I am.'

'...and understands that the latihan is a gradual process...'

'Isn't everything?'

'...and that the latihan's action is partly a cleansing one, so that people may temporarily re-experience past traumas or even physical ailments, as they are released.'

'Ah! That's familiar ground to me. Homeopathy, psychotherapy, detox diets and all therapeutic processes work like this.'

'We'd also like to explain how the Subud organisation works.'

'Oh, I'm really not a fan of organisations. I'd much sooner discover all that later on, if at all. Let me check out the latihan first, and maybe if I get hooked on it I'll feel drawn to the organisational stuff.'

'Then there are explanations about the latihan given by Subud's founder.'

'Same thing. I'm attracted to experiencing something directly. I plan to do my own research, without bias, and later I may be interested to look at someone else's findings.'

'But Bapak – the founder – reached a sublime level of receiving.'

'Says who?'

'All those who knew him closely.'

'Knew him? He's dead?'

'Yes, but I sense that he's still around guiding us.'

'Wooh! I'm not sure I want to be guided by a disembodied personality. I was hoping to tap into something universal.'

'Oh, the Subud latihan is absolutely universal. We have no rules...'

'Except the three month application period. Any other hidden requirements?'

'No. There are no teachings or dogmas.'

'Except that the founder was a spiritual giant and we need to listen to his advice.'

'Well we only ask you to listen to it, but you don't have to believe it. You can treat it like a fairy story which may make more sense later.'

'So are you saying that I'm like a naïve child?'

'Not just you. We're all at the nursery school stage, spiritually.'

'Speak for yourself! I've learned a lot from life and am a lot calmer and wiser than I was as an infant.'

'Well, anyway, come back next week and we'll talk more about it.'

'I'm very sorry, but I won't be coming back.'

Part II

In the above fantasy, why do you think the potential Subud member bolted?

Susila: Because she was way too impatient.

Stefan: Maybe, but you missed some opportunities to show respect and create some rapport with the enquirer. For example she says about purification, 'That's familiar ground to me. Homeopathy, psychotherapy, detox diets and all therapeutic processes work like this.' This was an opening for you to ask about Trish's background and interests.

Susila: But she came to hear about Subud, didn't she?

Stefan: Trish said she was hoping to find a spiritual awakening which doesn't require faith or study.* But then she realised that there's a compulsory three months study course *prior* to the experience. She seemed very disappointed.

Susila: But that's the rule.

Stefan: I thought Subud had no rules.

Susila: Well I didn't invent it! Helpers have to keep an applicant engaged for three months, and we do this with explanations about the latihan, such as about life forces or purifying ancestral burdens.

Stefan: But aren't there thousands of associations which offer a framework of spiritual ideas? When we helpers explain the latihan in such specific terms, might it not seem like a set of esoteric teachings? If an applicant has other ideas about human nature and development won't this create unnecessary conflict for them?

Susila: Well I always quieten myself beforehand and receive – as best I can – what to say to an applicant. No offence, dear brother, but I'd rather receive advice from God than hear it from you!

Stefan: I see your point. However the way we helpers habitually describe Subud to applicants doesn't always create a welcoming doorway for them. We have become so habituated to Bapak's explanations and terms like *lower forces*, *purification*, *worship of Almighty God*, we forget what it sounds like to someone new. We start to look odd.

Different from what's on the packet, which claims to be a simple, dogma-free experience.

Susila: Look! I really do my best. Subud helpers are unpaid long-standing volunteers. It would be nice to hear some appreciation instead of all this carping.

Stefan: Actually I very strongly appreciate you, along with all those helpers who've built up Subud as an international organisation. Genuinely and honestly. Without you it would never have happened. I'm really sorry that I didn't express that earlier.

Susila: So you agree that I should continue to do my best and don't need to change?

Stefan: Wish I could, but I can't, because Subud helpers – dedicated, sincere and hardworking as most of us are – are the *only* means by which a person can approach Subud. We either present a doorway or a barrier. If we can't improve our act Subud may fizzle out.

Susila: Sheesh! It's just like parenting. You give them the best years of your life. You do it for free. And then they blame you for everything!

Stefan: And, like parents, most of us give too much unasked for advice. We don't listen enough.

Susila: OK then. How do you suggest we could present Subud in a different way?

Stefan: Imagine we have leaflets with an introduction to the latihan from a Quaker perspective, a Hindu one, a non-theistic/scientific view and so on. Imagine when an enquirer like Trish comes we say very clearly that all views a Subud member holds are entirely personal.

Susila: Don't we already do that?

Stefan: I mean that if an applicant for example doesn't believe in God, or worships a Pantheon of Gods (as many Hindus do) or The Goddess (as some Pagans do), the helpers will actually show sensitivity to the enquirer's beliefs. They won't impose their own interpretations such as 'latihan is worship of the One Almighty God' when describing the latihan. We would then in practice – as well as in theory – become inclusive: an all-faiths, non-hierarchical group.

Susila: Yes, but I'm in the habit of just speaking freely without checking myself.

Stefan: That's exactly the point. I had to do a lot of hard thinking to realise how many specialist sounding words and ideas I'd absorbed without realising it from Bapak's talks. These ideas sound like assertions and many enquirers, some members even, find them alienating.

Susila: Thinking about all this gives me a headache. Isn't it from the lower forces?

Stefan: Far sweeter to simply receive. But Bapak urged us to balance outer and inner, to adapt Subud and ourselves to the culture and laws of each country. It's this adapting that is helped by using our intelligence. Lower forces are there to be governed, not

feared.

Susila: I'll consider all this but I don't really know where to start.

Stefan: One fairly simple skill that's helped me is non-judgemental listening.

Susila: Ha! Now look who's using special terminology!

Stefan: You caught me out! I took a short layman's course in 'co-counselling' and was surprised by how rare and precious it is to be listened to without comment or judgement. Some of the best help I've had from helpers is when given that kind of support. Heard and accepted rather than advised. That's non-judgemental listening.

Susila: I've done quite a bit of that with you. Did you notice?

Stefan: Em...I'm not sure. Have you studied it?

Susila: Long ago. It's coming back to me now. But is that why Trish was put off? Because I wasn't really listening?

Stefan: You were friendly and responsive to her, but maybe you could have drawn her out a bit about herself to create more connection. Then you might have asked if she had previous experience of any other spiritual path, or what she was hoping might be the effect on her life of latihan? That way you could have matched your comments on the latihan to her needs.

Susila: Sounds easy enough when you put it like that. It also seemed to put Trish off when she realised how much I love and value Bapak.

Stefan: In some countries Subud is seen by the government as a neo-Javanese cult. I think the reverence many members have for our founder and for the Javanese words and concepts he used can easily give someone a misleading impression.

Susila: So, you're saying that when Subud can demonstrate that we're dogma free and wide open to people of all beliefs the tide will turn. We'll see folk running towards us instead of away.

Stefan: Hey! You stole my last line.

Susila: I get that a lot! I suppose I just 'received' it.

*'a spiritual awakening which doesn't require faith or study' – There's a handy term for this which is 'emergent learning'. Experience first, and afterwards reflect on it. Fixed formulations are avoided because each new input of direct experience provides more understanding. Even the 'word spiritual' is an interpretation. It will not resonate with every Subud enquirer. For some the latihan might be compared to a natural and benevolent force of energy (like the Chinese Ch'i, the Japanese Ki or Indian Prana).