

Subud Sounds Like a Good Idea

We Should Try It Sometime

by John Hager

In all the years I have been in Subud I have been impressed by (and grateful for!) the complete freedom other Subud members have given me to rant and rave, shout and sing, chant and scream, run wildly, dance beautifully (well, I think so!), laugh loudly and cry seemingly uncontrollably. Some of my latihan have been horrendously noisy, dramatic, even ugly-sounding, filling every corner of the room so that there has been no escape for anyone else. (As Icksan repeatedly used to say of such 'purifying latihan': 'Yah, horrible! It will out!') And through all this I have never once received a hint of criticism, admonishment or negativity towards me at all. The patience and tolerance of Subud members who have had the misfortune to encounter my latihan have been remarkable.

When I first discovered Subud 30+ years ago, I was excited (and still am!) to find that Bapak's vision for Subud was for these same qualities — of personal freedom, tolerance and respect for the individual and his/her own experience and viewpoint — to be shown outside the latihan as well. 'How much,' I thought, 'we need this in the world today. If there is one thing we human beings seem to be good at, it is telling other people what they should believe and do! And clearly people will go to extreme lengths to do so.' And, of course, things have not changed of late, have they? How refreshing and hopeful it was to come across Subud apparently offering another way.

Bapak stressed over and over again that all that united us in Subud was the latihan and you simply had to ask sincerely to receive that. There was no signing up to any belief system, except, perhaps, believing in the *possibilities* of the latihan. In fact, Bapak was clear that the latihan was a unifying force for all of humankind, not just for an elite of true believers:

[W]hat Bapak has received is not for him alone but for all of mankind, irrespective of race or language, colour or nation because...the knowledge which comes from God is bestowed upon mankind and not for any particular race or this or that particular group. [San Francisco; March 26, 1958]

Subud was not a new religion but it could bring harmony to different religions:

Subud has not come to destroy religion; it has come by the will of God to bring harmony into all religions, so that in their totality they may represent one human family. [*Subud and the Active Life*, pp 108-109]

If ever the world needed this, it is now!

Bapak goes even further than this: Subud is not just for religious people:

In Subud there is nothing that goes against anything in religion, whether Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or against the beliefs of those who do not follow any faith. [*Subud and the Active Life*, pp 75-76]

Well, you cannot be more universal than that! Just by chance, I recently discovered that Rofé made much of this point in *The Path Of Subud*, p 181:

Subud does not discriminate on religious, political, racial or other sectarian grounds. Serious applicants are never rejected....If they happen to be atheists or Communists, this will in no way affect their admission....Adherence to Subud demands no allegiance to any particular belief; it does not even require faith, for a spirit of enquiry may equally well yield results.

How then can Subud achieve universality along with such diversity? Because, as Bapak has repeatedly said, Subud does not depend on ideas, beliefs, creeds, dogmas or words (which, as the world knows well, can all too easily cause horrendous conflict rather than harmony). It depends on experience and, more than that, *on personal and individual experience*. In fact, Bapak went so far as to say that the reason Subud had come into the world at this time was because it was especially suited to modern times and modern people:

At the present time men no longer believe in words but look for facts. Bapak himself feels that it is indeed the Will of God that the appearance of Subud is bringing about in man the facts which he demands in preference to words. [London; August 22, 1959]

And by 'facts' Bapak clearly means the experiences given by the latihan:

In Subud there is no theory — there are theories already in existing religions — but only receiving. And if people ask you what is taught in Subud the answer is 'Nothing'...No-one is given any theories.' [*Subud And The Active Life*, p 112]

What is needed is the practice; i.e. the latihan. The latihan is important. It should have priority and be regarded as fundamental for all of us. [London; August 22, 1959]

So we have to be very careful about our words! What is needed is: experience, experience, experience! And not only was Subud about experience, it was absolutely about a person's own individual experience:

The experiences or latihan of two people can never be the same because everyone is different from everyone else. Therefore, it is clear that there cannot be any theory or spiritual teaching in Subud because each person is different from another...*this is something personal for everyone*. [my italics] [Singapore; April, 1960]

Every person will find the right way towards God for himself *and what may be the right way for one may be completely wrong for another*. [my italics] [Singapore; 1960]

If 'Words Divide', Why Did Bapak Use So Many?

Words have a limited use. Bapak knew that we've had a surfeit of words and theories. Something else was obviously needed and Bapak believed that Subud was that something else:

We should not give any high-sounding explanations to those who wish to hear about it, and if, as a result, they ask what we have received in Subud the answer is that they should come and experience it for themselves. [London; August 22, 1959]

And the experience clearly does not depend on words.

And yet, Bapak gave so many talks! At first, there was some reluctance — and a clear awareness of the limitations of what he was doing. In fact, there were some dangers in it!

Because there is this surfeit of words Bapak does not want to give a lot of talks, for if after listening to him, you start to think about what he has said or try to understand what he has told you, then the more Bapak speaks to you, the more will his words be the source of fresh impurities, rather than a means of purifying the content of your heads, your heart and your feelings. Therefore, Bapak hopes that all of you will only listen to what is being said now and not indulge in any thinking or feeling about it, for this process of inner working takes its own course in you. [London; August 22, 1959]

So what then was the point of all these talks, limited though they were? Again, Bapak was clear about this:

[T]hese clarifications that Bapak has been giving are really intended to quiet the working of your thoughts, your heart and your desires...*thus making it easier for you to receive the latihan*. [my italics] [London, August 22, 1959]

So these words are clearly not meant to create a creed, a dogma or a uniform set of *beliefs* for everyone to intellectually follow but are simply to quieten the mind to make it easier for us to receive the latihan. When we listen to Bapak he wants us to listen in a special way: a way that is different from our usual way of listening. We need to listen more with our 'inner' rather than with our 'hearts and minds'. In fact, we need to be in that quiet, relaxed and receptive 'state of emptiness' that we are used to in our pre-latihan moments.

Years ago, I thought Subud members were joking when they said to me that I should just listen to the Indonesian parts of Bapak's talks and 'not worry about the translations'. Well, I can see there is some sense in that now!

When I hear Bapak's untranslated words, my thinking mind is less engaged and I can more easily respond in the way Bapak asks: with my inner. Then I feel a richness and a depth in Bapak's voice that is lost in the translation. I often feel a close connection with him and it is as if he is sharing some intimate secrets with me. Sometimes I just listen for a few moments and am led into the latihan as if it is the most natural thing in the world. I find this much more difficult when I read a Bapak talk; then, I suppose, the ideas all too easily become distracting and I begin to listen in the old way: with the intellect and feelings. When we do this, all sorts of reactions become possible and Bapak's words — as he himself said — can become 'divisive' (as we argue, compare, agree, disagree, wonder, make them a matter of 'faith', believe or reject), for 'words divide, the latihan unites'.

I have come across three very different reactions nowadays to Bapak's talks.

Here is the first:

I occasionally listen to a Bapak talk but I don't really think about it when I do. I guess it just flows over my head.

Several people have added a rider to this:

And, anyway, I usually fall asleep after a few minutes and only wake up when the talk ends!

The second is very different:

Bapak's words have a special importance to me and as Subud members we should listen to them often and do our best to put them into practice in our lives. Bapak clearly knows more than we do and I think all Subud members should follow what he says.

The third point of view is diametrically opposed to the second, and arises in those who cannot go along with the idea that uniformity is more important than diversity, and that Subud is only for a particular group who feel that Bapak's teachings are essential guidance for all Subud members.

We contend that when Bapak speaks he clearly speaks from his own religious and cultural tradition: that of a Muslim, and a Javanese Muslim at that. But, of course, this is only one standpoint: there are many, many other traditions in the world which Subud members should be free to follow.

Occasionally, there is a rider to this as the speaker declares his own allegiance to Christianity or whatever.

In many ways, Bapak seems to support the third view, saying, e.g:

In Subud there is no discrimination between the different religions because what comes to a person is really what is already within him....So a person who has a religion [as Bapak clearly did!] will experience in the latihan only according to what is in his religion and according to what is within him. [Singapore, 1960]

The unity we have in Subud is in the experience of the latihan. ('Words divide, the latihan unites.') Why then do so many of us look for conformity in words? Shouldn't we rather be celebrating a real unity in diversity? Surely, only then can Subud be truly for 'all of humankind' rather than just for one small group of particular 'believers'?

Shall I Leave Subud? Or Would You Prefer To Excommunicate Me?

I have been having at least two latihan a week now for over thirty years and I can see that this has touched just about all aspects of my life — sometimes amazingly so. Yet, in all that time I have never felt the need to:

1. Make any claims about Bapak's, or Ibu Rahayu's, or anyone else's, spiritual status.
2. Turn Bapak's 'explanations' into 'teachings' or expect everyone around me to do so.
3. Become a Muslim or imitate Bapak.

Bapak has, in fact, specifically warned against all these things.

Bapak never claims to be a saint, a prophet or anything like that — never. Pak Subuh is only Pak Subuh. For it is God alone who knows how Pak Subuh stands before God, and *it is not possible for men to know it.* [my italics] [*Subud and the Active Life*, pp 72-73]

In all this, Bapak's function is like a school-servant, who sets out the books, opens the door, clears the room and arranges the table and chairs. When you are all in the classroom the teacher will come and give the lessons, and the teacher is not Bapak, but God Himself. Bapak is not a teacher, but only the servant of God. This is, in truth, Bapak's position. [Coombe Springs; August 19, 1959]

Bapak said that the one sin in Subud was teaching, that there is no teaching in Subud and that there can't be because the latihan is an individual experience, different for everyone (as quoted earlier).

So it should be no surprise that there is not just one personal belief system in Subud. Some people find their spiritual guidance solely in what Bapak says; others look to other spiritual and religious traditions (Christianity, Buddhism etc); some to none of these but to other ways completely, e.g. humanism.

Bapak again:

You must not suppose that you have to follow or become like Muhammad Subuh. You must become your own self. And you must develop your inner self....You must not follow or imitate anyone else because you must find your own way. [Chicago; June 17, 1959]

The Changes I Would Make

For twenty out of the thirty-five years of my time in Subud I was a Subud 'official' — either a Group Chairperson or Regional Helper. During that time, I grew increasingly concerned that the focus seemed to have shifted too far away from the very things that had so attracted me to Subud in the first place. Worse, I was finding too many enquirers, also initially attracted by

these ideas above, were turning away from becoming members because they felt, on meeting Subud groups, that there was 'a gap between Subud in theory and Subud in practice'.

I had a letter published in a Subud magazine some time ago, expressing something of my own dissatisfaction with Subud and I was somewhat shocked at the response I got: phone calls and letters from people who had left Subud completely or — surprisingly — were now latihan either alone or with one or two like-minded 'lapsed members'. Some of these letters came from as far afield as Australia and the U.S.A. I was nowhere near as alone as I had thought! And, also like me, these disaffected folk were recording some life-changing, even dramatic latihan experiences outside of the Subud fold! Surely, this deserved investigating?

Amazingly, the Subud members I spoke to about this seemed either unaware of it, or simply unbothered. Some were annoyed with me to the point of anger for bringing it up at all! I am bringing it up again because some Subud people now seem more open to considering the 'state of Subud'.

Let's focus more on the basics of Subud as set out above. For example, if Subud is for people looking for experience rather than belief, why do we introduce the word 'God' before the experience? Many people have no problem with this but some do. Why not offer an optional alternative opening statement something like: 'I wish to experience the latihan of Subud' or 'I wish to be open to the highest force available to me' — or even a personal statement made by the applicant in consultation with the helpers, or even no statement at all?

Let's do all we can to ensure Subud is truly for 'all of mankind' rather than for the little group it presently appeals to.

In Conclusion

If Subud just followed the basic principles laid down by its founder — principles such as freedom of speech and belief, respect for the individual, embracing diversity — it could offer a real, practical example of what the world so needs today.

Shall we try it some time?

Note: The quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Edward Van Hien's book, *What Is Subud?*