

Walking on Air

By Stefan Freedman

*A Selection of Musings Culminating in the Description of
a New Latihan Group*

First Published: April 2014

Revised: February 2016

What Is Spiritual Growth?

For me it's about integration. Intellect without spirit limits itself. Spirit without intellect is 'ungrounded'. A successful marriage of the two produces a practical spirituality which can support an ethical way of living. That interests me a lot.

Voice from a Tree

I had a time in my life when my inadequacies as a step-parent were weighing me down. I'd always dreamed of contributing to world peace and I couldn't even get it right in my own home. What difference could one flawed person's actions make?

On a day when I was feeling downcast to the point of despair — and I suppose inwardly asking for help — I had a strange experience. For the first and only time in my life, it seemed as though a tree spoke to me! It was just a modest looking tree full of little dark seed-pods which were open. Readers may think I'm nuts. I heard in my mind the tree say something like: 'Look at me. My nature is to be abundant with seeds and to let the wind scatter them. I don't know which ones will root and grow or which will not. It's okay — I only have to fulfil my nature.'

Shortly after that the thought came to me, 'plant seeds for the future' (and I try to accept that we never know which ones will take root or not — and that's okay) and this experience has sustained me.

The Communication Tango

It's such a partner dance, to express yourself freely without treading on another person's toe — or to hear someone else's free expression without reacting to buttons that are being pressed. Especially when it includes people from faiths and nations who have a long history of conflict. When this becomes possible, my heart sings. I try to sidestep all my deeply ingrained pains and suspicions — and to allow for sensitive spots of other people — so that we can forge common ground.

Fear and Courage

Bapak urged us to be courageous. Yet I notice that Bapak and Ibu's advice contains a lot of cautions. And there are so many talks and so many warnings! Taken together these can feel oppressive: a web of prohibitions, danger signs and reminders that we should try harder, be more sincere, more patient, etc. It's so different from my direct experience, which shows me the value of compassion. Compassion is demonstrated in unconditional acceptance of others and of oneself. I feel irritated with someone but let it go. I feel disappointed with myself but let it go, feel fear but let it go, — and trust myself to step into the unknown.

This may be the heart of the matter. Having the courage to allow everything we have denied to surface. My own gradual emergence has been something like this. The latihan has dispelled

much of the fog in my mind, and the intense shyness that used to hold me back. It has helped me feel my emotions and a connection with my body, and has sharpened my intuition. I see that the latihan can be a remarkable teacher.

Passive Aggression

It's a widespread tactic in Subud to treat suggestions for improving the stewardship as negativity. And then say that we should examine ourselves rather than project our negativity onto Subud! So those who feel responsible and try to improve things end up feeling judged and stigmatised.

I have come to see this 'calm yourself and look to your faults' response as passive aggression. It purports to be harmonious but leaves others feeling downtrodden, creating intense frustration in the person with unresolved questions.

This happens so often it becomes like a repetitive-strain injury. It is a worldwide phenomenon that causes initiative-takers to withdraw from committee roles and community life. And often to leave Subud. That's so unnecessary!

How a person feels inwardly when making suggestions just isn't the point. It's like seeing a kid about to get run over. Who cares about inner-motivation? Save the kid!

Carrying On

There's a saying: 'If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you've always got.' After decades of simply carrying on it's useful to ask — okay, so what else might we do?

Subud without Religion?

I'm heartened that Ibu Rahayu said last February: 'Bapak spoke about this in talks; Subud should adapt to the circumstances and laws of the countries in which it operates. Subud can adapt to any situation. It can even adapt in countries that do not recognise religion.'

Sometimes she is so on the case! But doesn't this conflict with her strong plea, around the same time, that we adhere strictly to the opening statement once suggested by Bapak? Such references to The Power of the One Almighty God would need to be relinquished in order to adapt in a non-religious setting.

I think she wants to try to please everyone and keep things harmonious — which is the Indonesian way. It does leave certain conflicts rumbling underneath, yet we still gloss over them instead of acknowledging them and working through the core issues.

I work worldwide with groups, and many are interested in what might be called spiritual energy. I am fortunate to know a lot of people who are into consecrating a time and a place for experiencing something beyond our regular experience. Well, some of these are people who meditate. Others are into non-dual awareness (challenging the illusion of separated selves). Some are 'none of the above' — kind of spiritual freelancers. Belief in God is one way to approach this open state but surely it is not by any means the only way?

In Defence of Old Farts!

Someone posted on Facebook that the problem with Subud is having so many old farts in charge(!). But I admire elderly people who continue to play active roles. It takes great

dedication, faith, tenacity, etc. to stay active in your seventies or eighties. However frustrating the 'guardian' view is to reformers, it is genuinely well meant. I try to separate out the issues that frustrate me from the individuals, who have much in common with me. Dedication, tenacity, idealism and cherishing of the latihan — I guess we all want the same thing, while our different views of how to get there result in a polarisation. Same diagnosis, different prescriptions! Each person pulling their weight is sincere and deserving of appreciation. We just need to figure out what will work.

Soul Food

When Bapak coined the term 'a life within a life' I felt it described the latihan experience well. Being moved from a place other than the ordinary volition, hearing one's own voice utter words and melodies not consciously known, feeling a deep inner peacefulness: such things are consistent with the idea of an 'inner self'. Is this the 'soul'?

Untapped Potential

Several people are describing great untapped potential in the latihan — as a potential help to humanity. And in different ways frustration is being expressed about Subud's very specific style of stewardship which seems to make hearing about it and joining like an obstacle course. I've read some very specific pronouncements about what needs to happen. Well, this is where I get a bit wary. As soon as someone knows what everyone else should be doing, the danger is (history shows us so often) of replacing one strangle-hold or tyranny with a new one. Some of the prescribed remedies don't simplify access to Subud but just offer a new set of funny ideas that everyone would have to subscribe to. I prefer to stay with a 'beginner's mind' approach. There's a lot about the latihan we don't yet know. There are a lot of potentially interested people who haven't heard about it. And others who don't recognise its inclusive and universal nature because of the way it's been described. More exploration is warranted.

Keeping Up an Image

Most organisations have a public image to maintain. The more spiritual or ethical an organisation aspires to be, the higher the stakes. They will feel extreme humiliation if something sleazy or awful is revealed. They risk losing membership, funding, credibility and cohesion. So it's understandable why some office holders feel an impulse to sweep ugly, burdensome problems under the carpet. Subud often operates in just this way. Not only for the above reasons but added to them is a quest to 'stay harmonious', a tendency to look at problems as 'only purification' and a desire to maintain the light and anxiety-free atmosphere the latihan can create. People who threaten to disturb this oasis of tranquility tend to be shunned or scapegoated. And when conflicts do boil over, we often seek to resolve them through testing. Unlike a truth and reconciliation process, this still enables people to avoid hearing the viewpoints of all involved. Instead we try to find a smooth-it-all-over-quickly type of solution.

I want to help seed a more honest, 'real', fair and supportive intention among the latihan community.

Deprogramming?

One of the things that attracted me about the latihan was the possibility of being released from some of my 'programming' — from rigidity, inhibition, the need to fit in and please — as my own essential nature began to unfold itself. It took a long time, especially as I had a strong need to fit in and be accepted. Ironically, three decades later I found myself noticing how many Subud ideas had become part of my habitual way of thinking. I didn't grow up in Subud but for a period of about twelve years I did absorb a lot from hearing and reading Bapak talks in a very receptive

state. I literally catch myself and give myself a shake sometimes because certain notions now seem to me like prejudices I soaked up without realising it. And some of these adopted ideas acted as fears and inhibitors.

Through conversations with other Subud questioners, which this web site played a key part in, I started to become clearer about how many specific notions I had taken on board. My aim was to come back to a place of 'beginner's mind'. Not rejecting the ideas necessarily but re-embracing the 'don't know' which feels more growthful to me than certainties.

Early Bapak talks had a lot to do with the spiritual aspect of life — the forces that pull us hither and thither. That made good sense to me. As for hosting the latihan, the emphasis was on simplicity. Over time a number of agendas arose, to do with such things as enterprises, and Subud's structure. The tone — it seems to me — became more prescriptive. Two problems with having an authoritarian spiritual leader. First, it creates dependency on another person, whereas the latihan practise potentially makes people less dependent and more self-reliant. Secondly, when the leader dies, all that remains are static words that cannot adapt to new situations and can be interpreted differently by different people. This has been a limitation for many movements led by a charismatic figure, and surely applies to the direction Subud has been taking.

Bapak once said he was just like a school janitor, and not a guru. His words were guidelines which nobody had to take on trust, and not teachings. But with the huge body of recordings and the status they are given in Subud, many treat them as if they are the teachings of a prophet or spiritual teacher. So there are two 'streams' as it were in Subud. Those who place Bapak firmly in the centre, and those who find his words over-emphasised. (And some in-between, of course.)

There is a big problem with second-hand authority. Things get inflexible when people act on behalf of someone else's guidelines, often interpreting them narrowly. Unfortunately a whole array of limiting ideas have become part of Subud's *Helpers Handbook*, which endorses and perpetuates them.

As I challenged my own programming, my 'dissenting' views became more challenging to others. Some perceive me as pushy. It's so hard to fight for principles while still keeping an open heart and mind — to object to unskillful behaviours while still respecting the people involved. (And I see that most preachy helpers I know are very genuine and sincere!) What to do?

Testing Fever

I have witnessed in the UK, as a friend in Australia commented, that 'helpers keep extending the domain of matters they seem confident to test about'. And yet the main avenue for Subud's growth (or the main impediment) is the helpers, who are the gatekeepers. I genuinely appreciate that many helpers have served sincerely for years or decades and deserve appreciation. At the same time, many helpers I know seem to be change-averse, evaluation-averse, fatalistic and hostile to any 'interference' — even from less conservative fellow helpers. There seems to me to be a degree of 'attachment' (to roles, past ideas, habituated ways) to overcome before a discussion even gets started.

Then when things finally get discussed a huge effort goes in, but the results are not systematically acted on, and the status quo just reasserts itself. Sorry if this sounds cynical. It's

been hard for me, after decades of trying 'from within', to accept that most people just don't want change — even though (IMO) there's an urgent and crying need for it if Subud is to serve humanity, or even to survive!

Why Did the Ip Switch?

The latihan is a free resource which anyone can try, as they may try yoga, qi gong, meditation, mindfulness, Pilates, prayer, etc. It could have at least as many participants as all these other therapeutic or spiritual practices. So why not? It boils down to two things IMO. 'Guardian' attitudes and 'expert' attitudes. 'Guardians' have definite views on the quality and integrity of Subud, and the suitability and readiness of applicants. 'Experts' imply, sometimes subtly, that the applicant or 'ordinary member' knows nothing of value yet, and needs to give up their mistaken ideas and trust the Subud expertise of the helpers.

Seven(!) of my local Subud friends in Ipswich, UK, had bailed out for various reasons, mainly to do with local and visiting helpers who assumed they knew what was best for other people, and gave genuinely well-intended but patronising advice. For some, it was because when they asked questions they felt they were always 'shut down'. Some also disliked attitudes about women and the separation of women and men. Two people felt, for different reasons, unwelcomed by certain helpers and withdrew because they didn't feel able to open themselves spiritually in an unsupportive atmosphere.

All these considerations led to a kind of ex-members support group I was involved in. And when we eventually decided to start a new latihan group it was not in opposition to Subud (which some of us still very much appreciate and support) but as an alternative, for others who didn't feel at home and required a more liberal and equal set-up. In my ideal latihan group nothing is enforced, and people communicate freely about what they need and what might improve their experience. We learn as we go and develop, not only from the latihan, but from communicating about it.

Do Mixed Latihans Make You Horny?

After years of taking cautions about mixed-gender latihan and various other warnings as binding, and operating from a careful and sometimes fearful place, I've come round to a place of trust.

I trust people to try whatever feels right — or worth exploring — and to be adult, responsible and self-monitoring. This way respects peoples' maturity, freedom to make choices and ability to learn by experience.

We build in a time before latihan to share in a circle anything that's coming up, and this is part of creating a safe environment. Not limited by other people's concerns but discovering our own way, as a group of equals. We'll see from experience if this is workable. Early days yet, but so far so good.

Fresh Air

Here's a work-in-progress: a style of hosting the latihan which is being tried and tested in Ipswich, Suffolk, UK. We launched the group in August last year.

Active Inner Response (AIR) was set up collaboratively by five active Subud members including me — and six former Subud members who are still interested in practicing group latihan. Since then others have joined in, several travelling 60 to 90 minutes for latihan. In AIR we have freed

ourselves from the following ten Subud conventions:

1. *Helpers system*

In AIR, all are equal and peer support is given and received by all willing.

2. *Three month intro process*

In AIR a person makes inquiries, talks with practitioners, and joins in when (s)he feels ready.

3. *Standard recommended opening statement*

In AIR a person, having decided, may simply join the group exercise without any ceremony. Alternatively, they may make an intention silently or aloud, in their own words.

4. *Membership requirement*

In AIR we recognise that for some the exercise may become highly valued. But there's no way for an inquirer to know in advance how important it will be, and there's no requirement to sign any form or to be a member.

5. *Advice against 'mixing' or 'meditation'*

In AIR we respect any individual's interest in meditation, yoga, healing, psychology, etc. The only advice is to refrain from consciously using other methods during the half-hour exercise.

6. *No gurus or spiritual leaders*

In AIR we consider that everyone, whether experienced or new, has their own preferred sources of wisdom, and no wisdom is officially ranked above any other.

7. *Attitudes that can close down conversations*

There is no advice that discourages logical thinking, planning, asking questions, challenging orthodoxy; no taboo about discussing spiritual questions, reading diverse spiritual sources, psychological literature, political or ecological engagement, passion, etc. For those who want to take part, there is a sharing session (talking together/peer support) before the exercise.

8. *Assumptions about gender*

AIR supports women and men in following freely their own choices. There are no 'guidelines' concerning women's periods, dress code, subservience to husbands, gay relationships, a duty to have many children, etc. There is no taboo against mixed-gender latihan, though the aim is to provide people with a choice.

9. *Prohibition on advertising*

The AIR group have no desire to persuade anyone to do the exercise, and also no concerns that inhibit networking or simply letting others know it exists.

10. *Opposition to changes*

In spiritual communities where the inspirational teacher has died, members usually stick closely to past advice rather than innovate. This can cripple initiatives. AIR is based on the idea of emergent learning. We will learn from one another and from practical experience, and improve and adapt as we go along.

We are on a learning curve and welcome all feedback including constructive criticism.

www.air.eu.com

Okay, where do we go from here?