

# Open to whom? That Is The Question

by Bronte Grivell

I am contrasting the way in which Subud people I have dealt with actually behave, relative to the expectations created by all the literature on the subject.

*"If you know that one of your brothers or sisters is lacking something, do not insult them or hurt them. If possible, try to improve them, or provide what they need. So your actions will be wise, in accordance with your attentiveness in the realm of the soul." (Bapak talk "66 SOLO 1" given in Solo, Indonesia, 28th October 1966)*

## Personal background

At age fifteen I found out about Subud being a "contact with the Higher Self" when people I did Yoga with introduced me to it. They talked about the possibility of "being opened" to make contact with the spiritual life within— a simple way of achieving the goal of Yoga, which then, for me, was defined as "self-realisation". I jumped at the idea. Just like being given what the church would call "the Spirit of Christ within". But it was a "grace" or "gift", not something that had to be, or could be, worked for or earned.

I was told as a boy of fifteen, and have understood in all I've read since, that God's world is an Inner World first, a spiritual world, which we need to be opened to. I believed then, as I do now, that the Subud experience is a purifying form of training, and worship of God, all in one. So I literally asked God to open me to it one day when I had lost my temper at each one in my family, one after the other, and felt remorseful, and God responded, so I believe. I stood alone in the kitchen, and out loud I prayed, "God please let me receive the Latihan of Subud to purify me of my bad temper". I fell down crying for a second. Then I got up, empty of my bad temper, or any other feelings. Next year, when I asked Bapak during his first ever visit to our city if this was latihan, he said "Yes", and added that I had not done the right thing, so I should not do it like that again. I still do not understand why. Bapak advised me to wait till I was eighteen to be opened. My father finally gave his permission just the year before I joined National Service. I think he wondered which was worse, losing his son to Subud, or to have him killed in Vietnam, and he gave in to the lesser of two evils, in case the other was to happen anyway.

## Expectations of Subud

A seven year apprenticeship to the Christian faith by way of Sunday School was a good grounding for approaching the inner worship that mystics speak of. And isn't Subud meant to be an inner worship? "From the inside to the outside" is a phrase I recall being applied to the Subud training. "Training", I like that term: Subud people don't *worship*; they *train*. That leaves room for rituals of worship to happen elsewhere, in church, mosque, synagogue, temple, or meditation room. Did I say "meditation room"? There is a strange thing about that. Subud people don't meditate as Yoga students, Christians on a mystical path, and other types of believers are taught to do. Meditation is not recommended for Subud people, but for different reasons from why is not recommended for some religious people. Religious people must do the rituals and practices without falling into the trap of trying to contact the non-physical world. In my understanding, Subud is considered to be a real and immediate contact with the very life-within, which meditation only aspires to. It then can bring about, from a deeper level of awareness, some changes in the outer parts of our lives, if we let it, and can follow it. But we need to be "open" enough to let that actually happen.

Subud people are advised not to think too much about their worship of God, because it is an act of surrender to God's power. I believe we have to be open in our feelings and thoughts in order to experience it but I question how close we get to that necessary openness. The purifying experience is what I hoped Subud would give me, or do to me. I thought it was what happened to everybody who joined Subud. I still believe that there is that potential in Subud. Lots of books and Bapak's talks seem to say so. But did it, or does it, happen to everybody? I wonder still.

The purpose of Subud was, primarily, a "worship to God" as Bapak put it. Not self-realisation, not just purification, not even mystical training. Not quite the definition I had already been given, but very acceptable to me. When, in 1963, Bapak began his first talk, translated by his interpreter, Mas Usman, the first words were, "This latihan kejiwaan of Subud, this worship to *God*, that you do now, is not something new." Well, there I had it. Subud was okay. I could afford to be in Subud, because they worshipped God. I often come up against people of varying religious beliefs, who question, refute, or otherwise dismiss the validity of my Subud beliefs and practices, but I always fall back on that basic belief. What else can I do? I can only say "Your God is My God. There is but One!" I might ask them, "Who else but God answered my prayer?"

I was taught, before Subud, that people worshipping God are brothers and sisters. So they love each other; they care for each other; they make allowances for each other. Even all the Subud books and Bapak's talks that I read said that is what I would find in Subud: that my brothers and sisters are the Subud people of the world. How wonderful! But are they? I wish I could say yes, always. Again, I see a need for the word "open". But all these Subud people are "open" to each other in varying degrees.

### **Actions of the helpers**

Subud is something which might, I feel, reasonably be called "a group of friends". When, in my youthful period, before I took off the rose-coloured glasses, we had one of our first National Helper visits, I got the first reprimand from them. A nice, caring reprimand. A constructive criticism. He said to us something like, "You do not seem like a brotherhood. None of you are friendly with each other. You are like a group of strangers who merely come together for latihan but never get to know each other." So I started, right then, when I was about twenty-five, to try to get to know all the members of Subud in my home town. I visited them. Some are still my friends, almost. Except that Subud has broken their hearts, so we no longer share Subud. Or I have upset them, because I failed to meet their expectations, and they want nothing more to do with me. But aren't we all still brothers and sisters? I think so.

What do I expect from brothers and sisters? Certainly, in my private life, my real-life sister has nothing to do with me, as is the wish of her husband. They made that decision rather than resolve a difference we had years ago. Not my choice at all, but theirs. And it was the same situation with my father and his siblings. They too had a conflict, which resulted in no further contact between them for decades, right to the end of his life. Why is it the same in Subud? There I have only found that conflicts and difficulties are dismissed, and the people, helpers especially, who should most work to resolve them blame the "victim", accusing him or her virtually of being an inferior human being. Is this "openness?"

When a boy of fourteen came to our group, which is not recommended, he was welcomed in friendship, though Subud membership for him should have waited another four years. He was opened by his guardian, and attended a few latihan in

the first of the two groups here. He was consequently rejected by that group, and turned up at the second group, who tried to be “brotherly”, “caring”, and “open” towards him, with some reservations because they did not want a minor present in the latihan either.

Then all hell broke loose on us. I was puzzled, as I had recently returned from overseas to discover this situation. The National Helpers promptly dismissed two of the helpers in the second group here because they had allowed this boy to be present. Who should be responsible in a case like this? The local people who know the situation, or others? I puzzle to this day. The group helpers regained their status, but remained hurt and distrusting of the national helpers ever afterwards.

Ironically, this person was not the first under-aged person to be opened in our city; I was! In fact I have heard many stories of under-age openings. Checking Bapak’s words in print, you can find that the right age for opening is the age of puberty. A minimum age limit is set to show proper respect for the responsibility of the parents of the children who would like to be opened.

In that same year I had the most devastating experience of my Subud life. I was subject to a confrontation with three helpers, two with considerable experience locally, who saw fit to tell me that I “sang too loudly” in my latihan, that I “enjoyed it too much”, and that it had “not changed in all the time since I have known you”, according to one of them. This admonishment shocked me. The worship of God, which I thought I was doing, is between me and God, not me, the helpers, and God. That’s too much like the arrangement in some religions where the priests are in control, and may interfere. Is that what Subud had become? What happened to the idea that latihan is the individual’s own experience, which no one can prescribe, or dictate? I no longer felt free to follow Subud or the latihan in the way I believed and had experienced in the more than two decades up to that time.

Years later, when arriving to attend the other group here, I was taken aside and this time told that I disturbed the other members just by my presence. No mention was made of noise or any outward action that disturbed them. I dared not make noise in their latihan at that time, despite often having a good laugh and feeling joyful when I do latihan. Relevant to this comes the factor of so-called lifestyle. People say there is no dogma in Subud, so anyone can just “be there”, and be open or surrendered to the spiritual without the barriers of prejudice. It seems strange that Subud people are often unable to accept those who are different, the non-conformists, since Subud is, after all, the ultimate non-conformity. The rest of the world that I know looks at Subud as utterly weird.

### **How helpers could do better**

In this article I can only talk about examples from my own experience, although I know from e-mails and letters that my examples are only the tip of a world-wide iceberg in Subud. I am sure many readers will know of parallel examples from their own experience.

In the case of the opened fourteen-year-old, why was there no direct discussion by the National Helpers with the local people? Why did people not involved interfere without showing adequate understanding and concern? Where is the love in this? Is this the way Subud will in future handle things, with a central police force controlling the groups? Or is there going to be a better way? We look to groups or movements like Subud to help heal us, not open the wounds further. Those people then, and others elsewhere who take on the role of helper, should have enough care and sense to contact a member privately when something is wrong. In Subud the helpers are dealing with the very soul of the people in their care.

To me openness means willingness to be aware of the reality, the inner content of the event, not merely to apply rules. I believe that helpers fail Bapak, Subud, and themselves if they decide to ignore or shun people that don't quite fit in. I would hope that there is a lesson here which can prevent such things happening to other Subud people. I am sure there has to be a better way, one that is guided from the latihan. Or there is no way at all. We have guidance from the latihan to help us do the right thing in these situations. It is not sought enough. People are not "open" to it, preferring, in so many cases, their own mental concepts instead.

I used to believe that we in the Subud Brotherhood have to be open to all people. Anyone who wants to be opened in Subud is welcome. And if you are opened, you care, you make allowances for each other's failings. Appreciating how nice people are is easy. But when we are upset, or worse, when we upset others, then we really need friends. I say, in fact, that the person who has the biggest grump or gripe needs our friendship more, and is more a test of our ability to be a good human being, than just being nice to nice people. And isn't it more important to seek understanding and reconciliation, than to turn our backs on the things we don't like, or the people we don't like?

Why is it the tendency in Subud to say, "You have a problem; it is your fault!" And offer no solutions, no care, no understanding, just indifference, or anger that the matter has been brought before them? Is that going to attract people to Subud? Is that going to help them? No, I think we have to learn to reach out to those who do not behave as we expect, or are troubled, and give a helping hand. It is no use pretending we have a social outreach to the rest of the world when we have nothing to offer our own.

I believe that Subud has a much bigger role to play in the future of humanity than could possibly be guessed by any participant or onlooker. There may still be a few hundred million people God might be considering allowing to receive the latihan. Perhaps all of us are a barrier to even the next few dozen. And if we have something real in Subud, we must deal better with our own people, or we will disappear, as some think we have already done. I do not think that is really going to happen, or I would not question what I find wrong but merely condemn it, and thus become one of those who "throws out the baby with the bath water". Indeed, in a historical context, Subud is just a baby. It may have an interesting adult role to play one day. I want to be part of the life and growth of that "young adult".