

.CHAPTER FIFTEEN : NOT A SUBUD MEMBER, JUST SOMEONE WHO DOES THE LATIHAN

An Enjoyable Life; My Personal Experience of Subud; Subud Organisation; What Some Ex-Subud Members Say; Rofe and Bennett

For the next ten plus years, my life was much more the way I wanted it. My new partner and I had a good relationship and I really enjoyed being a step-parent again. I felt it a privilege to be my age and still part of a lively family life. For the second time, I had an important role in the growing-up of step-children and I was, again, to see these two girls become adults with their own families and independent lives. My family now included 2 of my own children and 5 step-children. I see that as a gift. And now my daily life was less stressful than it had ever been: I – at last! - had time to do more of what I wanted. I read lots; I walked across beautiful Suffolk landscapes; I sat in the “Quiet;” I had many moments of latihan which remained as vibrant as ever. I was particularly pleased to share this with my new partner. Slowly, my health improved and my life felt full. I remember I particularly liked being with my step-daughter’s friends when she was at University, studying philosophy. I felt like a student again myself as we sat up late at night drinking cups of coffee and discussing their studies and those timeless questions of life’s meaning and purpose etc. However, I did have one big discomfort at this time: I found myself becoming more and more critical of, and uncomfortable with, the Subud Association (I hasten to add that there was absolutely no discontent now with the latihan!) This was to get so bad that I began to see myself “not as a Subud member but just someone who did the latihan.” The former just carried too much baggage with it with which I felt at odds.

As the years went by I began to discover that I was not alone in feeling an allegiance to the latihan that I could not feel towards the organisation called Subud. In short, I was soon to learn that very many of us ended up by thinking that the focus in Subud had shifted from the individual’s own experiences of the latihan to promulgating the status of the man Bapak and the beliefs he held and which he consistently promoted in his many, many talks to Subud members.

How It Began For Me

I began my Subud days at a group which I now see as being just right for me because it was Latihan-Centred in a way which I have come to conclude is unusual. I was told *not* to read anything of Bapak’s until after I was opened and had experience of the latihan, which was “the real

essence of Subud”. I now see this as wise advice, for reasons which I think will soon become clear. Too many people have said to me that they were asked to accept a lot of what Bapak had said *before* they were allowed to experience the latihan. It was obviously not a case of “experience first, explanations later” for them.

Yet, even here in this wise group, I was surprised to find myself confronted, a week before my first latihan, with a set of words to say at my opening. They were words written in what was called “A Handbook For Helpers”. So there was some formality here, then! The words were about “witnessing my wish to worship Almighty God”, a wish that I had not said I wanted to make! True, I wished to KNOW if there was an “Almighty God” but the statement did not seem to acknowledge that. Instead it seemed rather to assume that there was a “God”, that I understood about the need for “worship” (which I did *not* at the time) and that I did actually *wish* to worship in some way. Oh dear, I thought Subud was about helping people like me to whom words like “Almighty God” and “worship” were not obvious but extremely problematic.

I was a little uneasy about this but said nothing and this was probably a shame because it is quite clear from Bapak’s talks that no one HAS TO say these opening words. Alas, I have recently been talking, though, to a small group of people who tell me they were given no choice but to say these words. In fact Bapak made it clear that, as long as someone was “sincere in their wish to experience the Latihan,” then no one had the right to refuse them. In fact, Bapak showed, in 1971, that even an atheist could take part in the latihan! However, I was not given a choice and the “ritual for opening” went along according to the Helper’s Handbook .

As it was, I think my opening had a formality and a sense of occasion that was not very helpful to me. Helpers travelled over for it from other groups – people I was hardly ever to see again and there was an air of a happy social occasion about the place. This I think made the opening a happy event for the Helpers there but the whole thing perhaps became too much of a social event for me! I DID enjoy the evening with all these people but the group Latihan did not happen for me until the next meeting which could not have been more low key – no words to hear or say at the beginning except “Begin” and only one other person there with me! What a contrast! Then I experienced a really strong and convincing latihan for myself.

Subud Beyond My Group

Within months of my first latihan, I became Chairperson of my group, mainly because no one else wanted to be it – sensible people, some would now say! Anyway, this meant that I had the responsibility of representing the group at what was called the “Regional Meetings”, where Chairpersons from all the local groups in our region got together to discuss the worldly and administrative affairs of our whole region. I was also required to attend the Annual National Congress where Group Chairpersons were seen as “delegates” and could vote on administrative, worldly issues brought to the Congress. I was to be involved in these Regional and National Congresses as a Chairperson or Regional Helper for about 15 of my first 20 plus years in Subud. So, this meant that I got around a bit! I had experience of Subud in the wider community than just my own group. This has, of course, influenced the views I now have of Subud in the world as does talking to many people inside the Subud Association itself and, of late, a number of people who have also left the Association. I want to suggest, therefore, that I am not just speaking from my own “unlucky” or very “a-typical” experience. I would suggest that my experiences, as described here, are, at least, fairly characteristic of what you, or anyone, would expect to have as you got to know a *number* of Subud people and groups.

The first thing that I found was characteristic of Subud groups and Subud Congresses, or Meetings, was, what I soon came to feel was an over-emphasis on *worldly matters and small talk*. Subud people will talk at length about worldly things but often seem reluctant when it comes to anything else unless it is what Bapak has said. I have found this both puzzling and frustrating for all the years that I have been a Subud member. It is there in the talk of individual members before and after the latihan and it dominates the Agendas for Congresses and larger Meetings. Bapak’s talks are full of references to God but what that actually means is never dwelt on: it seems just to be rather too easily accepted just as it is in any of the monotheistic religions.... There seems to be no concern for meanings or ideas about life purposes, for example or even – surprise, surprise!- latihan experiences themselves. I have been constantly amazed that all sorts of tremendous, strange even weird things may go on in the latihan and *there will be absolutely no comment about them afterwards!* Why, then, is there what seems to amount to a “conspiracy of silence” about spiritual and psychological experiences amongst Subud members in the main? I soon saw that it probably stemmed from Bapak sometimes advising not talking about such things -“*not to indulge in any thinking or feeling about it...*” he says, eg.

This was all very confusing for me! I thought: “Here is a man who does not want too many words, explanations, understandings etc. and all that are associated with words and YET WHO has himself given so many talks, in various countries of the world, that you could FILL A WALL IN YOUR HOUSE WITH THEM!! Why is it O.K. for Bapak to give explanations, to be so concerned with such “words” etc. and no one else? Why are his the only ones to be listened to? Why should others be advised not to think about such things?”

I began early on in my Subud life to feel that Subud had become too Bapak-centred, so whatever Bapak says goes and that is that! I believe Bapak, as the founder of Subud, deserves all the respect that is possible BUT does that mean that he should be seen as an infallible human being so that everything he says has to be uncritically accepted? He, himself, originally claimed no such special place for himself, so why have so many Subud members, I wondered?

Subud Organisation

Bapak has organised Subud so that:

There is a sharp distinction between the material and spiritual aspects of life. Committees of Chairpersons, treasurers and secretaries run the administrative side and there is a similar Helper structure for the spiritual side. (Group, Regional, National and International committees and helpers)

The result of this separation is that it can too easily lead to a simplistic approach whereby thinking, feeling etc. are to be limited, as Bapak says, to the material side of life only so that it is O.K. to think about finances and buildings and other such worldly things but thinking about ANYTHING else is discouraged. I wondered if that was the main reason why Subud folk are so reticent about the latihan or any of those deeper philosophical and psychological issues of meaning and purpose etc. that have occupied some of the best human minds that have ever lived? It may also have led to that curious Subud phenomenon whereby some Subud helpers attend committee meetings but only contribute with “spiritual quiet” and “testing” and some committee members, no matter how experienced they might be in the latihan, will ONLY talk about worldly concerns, leaving anything else to the helpers!

Enterprises

Another result of this separation and encouragement to keep the mind harmlessly busy by occupying it with only “worldly things” is an emphasis on making money through what are called “enterprises”. True, the money is to be partly used for charitable purposes and for helping the Subud organisation to own its own halls etc. Most of these have failed and some have failed spectacularly with varying degrees of hardship. They were obviously very dear to Bapak who talked about them in every talk he gave, I think. As yet, his “vision” has not been implemented. I would have thought the example of the early Quakers was all that was really needed here! In other words it has already been done but not by Subud members.

Latihans

There are two group latihan nights and each latihan will last “approximately” half an hour. I experienced a number of helpers (not by any means all) who interpreted this to mean no more or less than *exactly* 30 minutes and so called for an end to the latihan whether you had finished or were still in full flow. That always felt to me like “latihan interruptus.” I also noticed that this bit of Bapak’s advice (to have 3 latihan a week: ie 2 group ones and 1 alone) was the bit that many helpers and members did *not* follow! They could be quite strict about urging others to follow Bapak’s advice about all sorts of things but all too often they themselves did not follow this bit! I wondered why that was?

Men And Women

There is also a fixed separation between men and women, so that not only will they always latihan separately but there is also a clear “Subud view” of men and women, coming, of course from Bapak – that men, for example, are the “spiritual leaders” and women are some sort of spiritual “vessels”! This is an area of Subud which is abhorrent to an increasing number of Western people. Why, until very recently women were still being given a “form” to fill in, before they could join, on which they were asked if they had been given permission to join Subud by their husbands. Husbands, on the other hand, were not asked for their wife’s permission! My partner refused to have anything to do with this form. Apparently, there had been some talk amongst the helpers over several months about the form and eventually the National helpers tested about it: they received that the form should **not** be changed. However, a phone call to the Equalities Commission showed that the form was in opposition to “the spirit, at least, of equal opportunities legislation and was possibly

illegal...” It was this I think that led to the form then being changed and, I believe, it is now more acceptable to the western view, although I have still come across Subud helpers who refuse to agree to this because “it is not what Bapak has said.”

The silliest example of the nonsense of this kind of thinking was clearly shown when I went to one of Bapak’s talks and for some incomprehensible reason the organisers had taken it into their heads to sit the women on one side of the hall only and men on the other! I have never in my life seen anything like it – it just looked so odd! It might not have done in somewhere like Indonesia but here in London?! And, of course, it was infuriating to some married couples who expected to sit together to be told that is not how Bapak liked it (I cannot believe that was ever true). Anyway, a couple near to me overcame this by getting to sit together in the middle of the hall at the point where the women’s line joined the men’s! To be fair, I only saw this happen once in all the many mixed meetings I have been to. But where could such misunderstanding come from if not from a traditional, cultural (Eastern) view of “men” and “women” and from a clear uncritical wish to do what it was thought Bapak wanted, irrespective of the wishes of anyone else?

I shudder to mention Bapak’s views on menstruation which still means that many, perhaps all, Subud women do not latihan at all at that time of the month. Could it really be a “purification of the blood” as my Helper’s Handbook says without a shred of medical or scientific evidence to support it?

Of all the things that Bapak has said this area seems most obviously to me one that comes most certainly from Bapak’s own culture, rather than from some new or Inner revelation of the “roles” of man and women. Subud here looks to me to be completely out of touch with what is happening, first, in the Western world and now beyond ... That does not, of course, mean that Subud is wrong (although many of us clearly think it is!) but it does mean that it, has a belief-system that isolates it from a large part of the world: people, that is who find such views so repulsive and backward-looking (being based on old culture rather than modern thinking) that they simply can have nothing to do with it. This shows quite clearly to me what happened when Subud got involved in Bapak’s *ideas* etc. rather than just sticking to the exercise of the Latihan and being more concerned with the experience of the latihan. I personally wish, too, that there was more encouragement for explanations other than Bapak’s to be considered more in Subud. Subud’s publications, and members by and large, bother only with Bapak’s and this makes Subud appear very narrow and ill-

informed about what is going on in the rest of the world. The exciting work going on in Western science and in research, generally, appears to be of no interest whatsoever to Subud people who are content it seems to let Bapak do their thinking and talking for them, believing it to be always something akin to “divine guidance” rather than cultural conditioning.

The Theory Of The Forces In Life

For a movement that has no teachings, Bapak talks a lot about the “forces” that exist in life. He might not like thinking about spiritual things but he quite clearly has an intellectual system that he adhered to and talked to Subud members about almost continually. It is not a system that appeals to me, although I know a number of people to whom it is perfectly comprehensible and reasonable. S.C.R. Weightman, a lecturer in Religious Studies at the “School of Oriental and African Studies”, traces Bapak’s scheme of forces back, first, to the Neoplatonists, and then to the Sufis, who he says took it to Indonesia. So, once again, this looks like old “religion” rather than new revelation or even Inner receiving. Although Subud members are not expected to sign up to agreement with any of this, most of them will and there can be a lot of talk about it. As a Subud member it is unlikely that you will not be asked to test about the influence of the various forces (the material, vegetable, animal and human and yet more – any the wiser?!) I have done this test several times myself and had some interesting experiences but I cannot say any more than that.

If you were interested in these forces you could find out more from a book that it is said “most, if not all Subud members will want a copy of”: Bapak’s book called “Susila Budhi Dharma”. Subud now really seems to have the features of an old religion: a “prophet” or at least authority clearly vested in a highly “visible” leader, its own special book, its own rituals (2 latihan of a certain length a week, a 10 minute quiet sit beforehand, shoes off, “Begin” and “Finish”), a recognised “priest craft” or hierarchy (various kinds of Helpers and then “ordinary” members) and it has its own belief system (that Bapak is... that men and women have these qualities and roles..that life is explained by these “forces” etc etc...) It, also, clearly expects its Helpers, at least, to promote this “belief-system” because, as Bapak says: “they are Bapak’s helpers after all.”

Subud members will still maintain that all this is just “advice” but to more ordinary folk this is an illusion that becomes more and more difficult to maintain. For example, one of the best introductions to Subud is, I think, a book written by a non-Subud member: “The New Religions”

by Jacob Needleham. In the sympathetic chapter on Subud, Needleham quotes Bapak as saying “We do not have a teaching and there is nothing that we have to learn to do because all that is required of us is complete surrender.”(Great stuff!) However, even Needleham finds himself 15 pages later talking largely about Subud “teachings, most notably on sex and death!” Needleham himself seems to have missed the contradiction here!! An easy “mistake” to make, I would say.

Subud Appears Cultish

Sometimes Subud looked “cultish” to me. It has only a few members who represent a very small part of the world’s population, even though Bapak clearly thinks that Subud should be for “all of humankind”- he even has a collection of his talks called by that title, in fact. Often, this small group, when it is known about by people outside its membership, appears to be rather quaint and eccentric with beliefs and practices that seem out of touch with the modern world. Worse, the only thinking that seems to be encouraged is its founders. History only too recently has shown just how foolish (and sometimes downright dangerous!) following a leader less moral and scrupulous than Bapak can be. Thank God that, because of the kind of man Bapak was, all this leads to in Subud is an isolating narrowness and an inability for Subud to be taken seriously ENOUGH by the modern Western world or by ENOUGH educated people all over the world for it to make much difference to either!

So, Subud people too often appear as parrot-like followers, narrow in their thinking and unchallenging of the ideas that are put about in their names.

Subud Appears Too Muslim

From very early on, I had difficulty with the Muslim influence. I met so many Westerners (Bill, David etc) who now called themselves Latif, Rashid and other Muslim names that I felt both amused and uncomfortable- it was so odd! You see, it did not work the other way round: I never met any Muslim who now had a Western name! I had no problem with people changing their names just why were they always Muslim here in this strange group?

And then there is the emphasis given every year to Ramadan. It is a big event for so many Subud members. Many have even converted to Islam but even those who have not will join in with this Fast because Bapak has said how beneficial this is. He has also said the same about Lent but you

don't hear much about that in Subud! For a few years the date of Lent was put into the Subud publication of the time, at my request. When I stopped requesting it there was no longer a mention.

Harmony And Surrender

Because Subud members have been repeatedly told that harmony between themselves is, in fact, the most important thing (and this is interpreted as meaning no discussion made lively through disagreement), Subud members do not tend to rock the boat by voicing anything that might be considered contentious. Many, perhaps most, see themselves as just turning up for the latihan, not thinking much about it, certainly not sharing talk about it, or its experiences, afterwards, - or, in fact, any time at all - and not questioning, disputing, or arguing about anything. And because there is this often expressed idea that spiritual things are best "left to God," they will try to focus single-handedly, usually, on their own latihan, which means that if it has no, or little relevance to their lives they may do very little about it. Often, it seems that their attendance at the Latihan then becomes spasmodic and irregular and, after varying lengths of time, many will actually leave. Some return later, many are never seen again. It is an undisputed fact that if all those who have left Subud had stayed then it is possible that by now Subud could really have had a big effect on the world! It is an undisputed fact, also, that the number of Subud members who continue regularly with two or three latihans a week is very small. Many who now hold key positions in Subud as National Helpers etc. do themselves average only one or two group latihans a month! Having said this I hasten to add that there are some members who could not be more devoted to the latihan and would not miss attendance at these three a latihans a week for anything BUT it is well known in Subud that they are easily a very small minority. Amazingly, there is little or no concern expressed about all this. Again, it is often considered to be something best left to God! (As a friend of mine once said: "You should see my garden when I leave it to God!") Many Subud people seem to be so wrapped up in their own individual lives and affairs, that they have little or no interest in Subud as a collective or a group. And when they do, it is simply in order to maintain the status-quo set up by someone who is believed to know better! Or they quietly leave...

Sharing My Discontents (For The First Time!)

Well, seeing all this and feeling that Subud had so much more to offer, I did try to share my concerns with the Association by sending an article to the national Subud publication explaining my position. The article was

too long to be published as an article, so it was halved and published on the letters page at the back. The title: “Who Says Subud Does Not Depend On Belief?” was completely cut out which I think is a shame because it is such a challenge to Subud folk who will tell you quite categorically that there is no belief in Subud and yet look askance at you if you dare to question something Bapak has said. The results of this “letter” were extremely interesting. Suddenly, I had letters and phone calls (this was pre-internet) from as far away as Australia, New Zealand and the USA (sometimes people seemed unaware of the time-differences and contacted me in the middle- or worse- in the early hours of the night!) I was truly amazed at the numbers of people who felt as I did. And what surprised me even more was that many of them, having left “Subud,” were still continuing with the latihan, often alone and sometimes with a small group of other like-minded people! What they all shared was a feeling that there was no place for them in Subud because they would not agree to 2 basic beliefs that they felt they were being continually pressured into agreeing to:

- The infallibility of its leader: Bapak . It is assumed that because someone is sometimes inspired, he must therefore always be inspired. It is assumed that because someone has had some obviously special experiences, he is therefore some kind of “prophet” rather than remaining an ordinary man in any respects.
- This over-idealisation leads to his ideas, and just about everything he says, being given the authority of “holy writ”

To many people Bapak’s words are to be unquestioningly followed as being from a “Higher Source” than anyone else’s. The idea that Bapak can speak, like the rest of us, from his own culture and personality is scandalous and hurtful to these members.

What Others Said To Me

Here are some of the reasons given to me, at this time, for others leaving Subud. I include here the most common told to me:

“Subud is too narrow in its outlook. Its members are so spiritually unaware and it just got so depressing being with them and not growing. I wasn’t growing and neither were they, I am sure. I don’t think the latihan and Bapak’s advice are enough on their own to prevent its members

eventually getting stuck and, worse, being completely unaware of it” (A lecturer and author of a number of books on the spiritual life)

“I got sick of all this talk about money and enterprises. I did not join Subud to become a business man” (A retired professional man)

“I have never had a decent conversation with anyone in Subud about God or anything like that!” (Another retired professional man)

“I think there is an unhealthy attitude to Bapak’s words and I have never understood why two people united in love (ie man and wife) cannot be united in their latihan” (An ex-policeman)

“I have just got rid of one Pope, I don’t want another!” (A lapsed Roman Catholic artist and housewife)

“I have always felt like you but I have not had the words or the courage to speak out like you have.” (A gardener and handyman)

“You are not the only one to think as you do. Can I put you in touch with...” (A Subud lady of 80 plus years)

“From working on Subud enterprises I can tell you that anyone with any such integrity and honesty as yours will simply not be able to stay in the Subud Association. I have been bemused beyond belief by the way Subud members expect to do business. They are the weakest links on any project because they put a saccharine harmony above all else and it’s the devil’s own job to get them to *do* anything!” (An ex-M.D of a number of companies, inside and outside of Subud)

“I was interested in what you said about Subud but when I saw what was said about women, I preferred my Tai chi!” (A housewife)

“When I was in Subud, I was always made to feel that it was not the done thing to talk to men about Subud things, or even mix with them after latihan.” (Another housewife)

“I left Subud over 10 years ago, when I detected a change. Bapak seemed to be talking of himself as being in the “line of the prophets”. (retired American man).

I have not got permission to quote these so they have to be anonymous. Just in case you think I have made these up I will include some comments that can be more easily verified.

Reading the original Journals, I came across an article by a lady written in the late 1960s or 70s who coined the word “Bapakolatry” for the attitude putting her, and people like her, “off Subud”! Subud she felt should be about widening and deepening our own experiences of the latihan and to put so much of a focus on Bapak and his talks was actually hindering that!

The two most influential Westerners in Subud history (Rofe and John Bennett) whose initial enthusiasm made Subud an international phenomenon have expressed similar views and left the organisation.

In his book “A Spiritual Psychology” Bennett writes:

“In 1962 I came to the conclusion that the latihan is too limited in its action to provide a complete way of life. This was confirmed by the observation that those who practised it ...tended to become *narrow in outlook and loyalty*. Subud was becoming a new cult or at best a Moslem sect. I was not interested in dogma (the talks!) but in method (the latihan) As a method the latihan works...This action cannot take more than one to two years...to continue longer is non-productive and finally counter-productive.” (pp 29-30)

Rofe has written a great deal more. (See his book “Reflections On Subud”) In the 1988 reprint of his “Path Of Subud” he writes:

“For 20 years, I have stood aside from the organization of Subud” (p2)

“I realized the dangers of uncritical and emotional hero-worship which many Western followers insisted on directing towards Pak Subuh. I realized the dangers inherent in their approach, both to themselves and to others, that they needed a more balanced outlook, even in the interests of the movement itself” (p3)

“...fanaticism dies hard. Led by emotion rather than intellect, many Subud members became persuaded of the infallibility of Pak Subuh, and not only on spiritual issues. He could never be wrong about anything so if he said (as in fact happened) that Pharoah threw King David into a den of tigers, history and scriptures had to be wrong but he could not” (p3)

Rofe also mentions how such comments as these led to Subud members being “forbidden” to read his book “Reflections On Subud” (p3)!

Finally, Rofe says his belief in the latihan remains. He says also that “the Subud movement and the memory of its founder can stand on its own merits” and that “those who remember Pak Subuh from personal experience have a sacred task to perform in accurately compiling for the future an honest account of the life and work of the great and remarkable sage” (p4) It is clear that those who knew Bapak well, like Rofe, attest to the man as making mistakes and able to be wrong! (Rofe, eg, gives a number of examples!)

Enough! Anyway, the response to my “letter” encouraged me to write a shorter article for the Subud national publication (then called “The Bulletin”) I had been asked by some sympathetic readers to make my points as clearly and briefly as I possibly could. This was never published, although it was very brief and it could not this time be through lack of space. I can only think it was too contentious and not what Subud editors and others wanted published. It was later pointed out to me that I had not gone through the “proper Subud channels” and that was unfair, therefore on Subud. (Again, Subud is organised to deal with problems by, first, talking and testing with them with the local helpers, then the regional helpers, then the National Helpers right up to a lady called Ibu Rahayu who seems to have become Subud’s top spokesperson. She gives talks in various countries, gives people new names when they request them and has talks published in Subud publications. In other words she now, to all intents and purposes, seems to have taken on much, if not all of Bapak’s role). So, I did this next... I sent a copy of both of my articles to the National helpers (man and woman), to the International Subud publication (called the “Subud Voice”), to the Chair of the “World Subud Association” and to Ibu Rahayu. To date, both National Helpers have replied: the lady with sympathy and apparent understanding; the man with no apparent understanding. His response to my carefully written letter and the articles was: “What’s the problem then?”! I wondered after a couple of minutes of talking to him if he had even read my stuff as he showed absolutely no idea of what I had written. We made polite conversation and I brought the “conversation” to a speedy end! I have had no response from the “Subud Voice”, the Chair of the World Subud Association” or Ibu Rahayu at all. I am best dismissed it seems by the officials but the response from ordinary, and ex, members – well, that was something else!

I felt convinced that these criticisms etc should be taken seriously. But what did that mean? All I could do, it seemed, was what many had obviously done before me, leave the Association and just get on with the latihan. I now considered myself “Not a Subud Member, Just Someone Who Does The Latihan.” And then, years later, came another surprising change...