

Let's Celebrate...No Spiritual Hierarchy

Two angels spied a man picking up a pebble from the beach. Suddenly one angel gets very excited and anxious because he sees that the man has picked up the pebble of *Truth*: he knows that this could transform life on earth. He begins to panic. "Surely we have got to do something," he says, "to control this?!" The other angel remains completely unperturbed. "Don't worry," he says, "he will only *organise* it!" (A version of an old Buddhist story)

Writers like Rofe, Vittachi and especially Harlinah Longcroft in "The History Of Subud Vol 1" make much of the fact that, in its early days, Subud was remarkably free of any *organisation*. The latihan began and spread without the support of many of those aspects that some people have come to believe are inseparable from, even *essential* to, Subud today. There were daily latihan (with people wandering in and out at odd times); they often went on until 5 am; some men were allowed to open some women ("History Of Subud" p80 + p117); there was no opening statement; no three month's waiting period (p70) and, at one time, there were four different latihan groups, two of which believed in mixing meditation, and other spiritual practices with the latihan, and, interestingly the leaders of each of these groups still had some latihan together (p115). There was, also, no great worry about protecting the public from the latihan. Why, there was even a martial arts-type contest between latihan members and other groups to which reporters and other members of the community were invited as spectators! (p82) And because Subud had such a reputation for healing, members were only allowed to make a financial charge to non-members who were healed by the latihan but who did not want to carry on with the latihan after! (p115)

As membership grew at a time when the government of the day was in a precarious position and the country was politically unstable, Bapak felt that it was necessary to "create a formal association so that there could be no doubt in the mind of the government as to what was being done by those who came to his house in the evenings" (p118) Thus, to alleviate suspicion the process of organising began...Then, later, when Subud exploded in the West and there were all sorts of fantastic stories in the media and elsewhere, the organisation finally came to be

what it is today. But even in those days not everyone was in favour of this organisation. Harlinah Longcroft says “Lots of people did not agree with it.” (p119) Later, when Bapak was questioned about the need for it, he would reply by saying “Ask these people, if they do not organise their own lives!”

Bapak’s way of organising was to make *distinctions*: between helpers and committee, and between helpers (group, regional etc). Now as soon as you make distinctions you open up the possibility that some of these will be seen as “higher” or “better” than others i.e. a hierarchy is born. Some people believe this to be inevitable. Carl Jung, e.g., believed that human beings had within them a “hierarchy archetype” which means that the psychological pressure within us to create hierarchies is as strong as our instincts are biologically. But in Subud there is evidence that this does not have to be the case. Recently an International Helper told me that when he first took on this role some people began to treat him “differently: rather too deferentially” he said and this made him “uncomfortable” because he knew he “was nothing special.” I liked him! More recently, I took part in some testing with a little group for someone who had been asked to take on a committee role. He was honest in saying that he looked on this as rather “mundane”, feeling that it was “less important or as appealing as the kedjiwaan side” He received, along with the group, that this would, in fact, be a very “spiritual experience” for him! So, he gladly took on the job!

From the beginning, Bapak stressed that these roles were just “jobs” that needed doing in order that Subud could develop in an orderly way in the world and could also give adequate support to its members. There was no suggestion that these roles were given as “rewards” for spiritual progress or labels denoting any kind of spiritual authority. “Bapak has repeatedly said that no one in Subud has on his own any authority over anyone else” (van Hien: “What Is Subud?” p57)

This was a point that Bapak had to repeat every so often with regard to *helpers*, beginning, in fact, at the 2nd. Subud Congress when, as van Hien puts it: “Bapak painlessly pricked the balloon of spiritual pride which had inflated itself almost everywhere. As one journalist wrote: “All the generals were reduced to the rank of corporals.” (p58) The reminder I enjoy the most came some time later when Bapak said that “there was no truth in the rumour that group helpers had one angel on their shoulder, regional helpers two, national three and international four!” In

fact, “there is something Bapak needs to remind the helpers...Bapak has arranged this structure of local, regional, national and international helpers purely to have a way whereby the local helpers are not overburdened. In other words, if things get too much for them there is somewhere they can turn for help.” And, he says, “helpers should not feel a difference between themselves” (Pewarta Supplement no. 9 p 196 and Helpers Handbook p31) Things do not seem to have changed very much because I see in her recent talk Ibu Rahayu stresses the need to give new helpers the Helpers Handbook in order “to get helpers back on track”

Bapak was clear that helpers had an *important but limited* role: primarily to open new members (van Hien p57 says this is the only “authority” they have); “to give explanations concerning the basis and aim of the latihan” (Handbook p16) and to be a “servant” in the way Bapak described in “Subud And The Active Life” p134. Clearly, they were *not* to see themselves as teachers! Bapak really meant this, declaring that: “The one sin in Subud is teaching” (Vittachi “A Memoir Of Subud” p26 and van Hien p 36). Actually Bapak went further than this. He maintained there were very few *real* helpers because a real helper “is one who can recognise his own mistakes and can correct them” (van Hien p58) i.e. *is someone who can change himself, not other people*. It was not about correcting or teaching other people. It was about keeping close to the latihan oneself and assisting in keeping the focus on the latihan rather than on anything else. To attempt more than this is to be in danger of creating division and argument and even, in fact, becoming a barrier to a person receiving the latihan for themselves. Bapak repeatedly warned that any sense of superiority was bad all round- for helpers themselves, for the members and for Subud itself. This seems particularly significant when enquirers or applicants are involved. Again, an important reminder from Bapak: “in many instances it was quite possible for the person being opened to be far more spiritually advanced than the person who opened him...length of time in Subud was itself no criterion of spiritual progress or development” (van Hien p59)