

## CHAPTER TWO... ON THE SUBUD ROAD!

*My first “Bapak talk”; A highlight of my Subud life; another unflattering self-revelation...but some noticeable improvements, too; Testing; the Spread Of Subud; more experiences*

I have never been someone who enjoyed driving-even with my newer car. Yet it was not long before I was driving 600 miles a month just to get to latihan twice a week. Still the journeys just flew by as I was having a great time in the car, singing, shouting, chanting, grunting and goodness knows what! I often arrived home around midnight more awake than ever, full of excitement, energy and happiness. This would usually carry on through most of the next day at least, so that my work, rather than suffer because of tiredness, actually went more quickly and much more pleasantly by.

### *A Trip To London To Hear A Talk*

Occasionally, I journeyed further afield for latihan. When Bapak, the first person to experience the Subud latihan, came to London I would usually go to hear him talk or, even better, to latihan with a large group of men who would travel to see him. I was taken to my first talk by an older Subud man who seemed to make his little, green, 2 C.V. Citroen almost fly down the motorway! I know these little cars used to feel (and sound) as if they were doing 90 m.p.h. at about 40 m.p.h. but I can remember, even to this day, holding on to my seat as we overtook a variety of much bigger and more powerful cars. We invariably arrived early! And so we did on this particular occasion for my first experience of a “Bapak talk.”

I remember feeling somewhat wide-eyed and naïve about the whole thing. It was soon to seem almost totally designed to repel me! First it was at a “top” London hotel. I walked into this huge room decorated in, what I considered to be, failed plushness. Red was the predominant colour: red chairs (100s of them) and the huge stage at the front seemed overwhelmed with these huge (20 foot?) shiny red curtains. Worse instead of luxury they seemed to project a feeling of decadence, of luxury past its sell-by date to me! My worst fears were confirmed when I found a seat. There was an envelope on each chair asking for donations towards the cost of hiring the hall for the evening which was £20,000 (this was 20 odd years ago!) I could not help myself literally flinching. Not for the last time did I ask myself if I really wanted to belong to a group that could justify spending this amount of money on something like this, especially

when so much of the world could benefit so much (certainly for more than an evening) if this money were spent differently. And was not this supposed to be a charity? I tried to push such thoughts away and simply concentrate on what was happening around me. People were flooding in now. A little group went to the still vacant rows at the front, saw that they were reserved and so turned angrily away with the comment “ I thought we had no hierarchy in Subud.” Certainly, there is not meant to be ANY hierarchical divisions in Subud: we are all in the same boat. I think, though, the organisers were trying to be good hosts and reserving seats for a variety of people: Bapak’s family, overseas visitors etc. rather than let them fend for themselves like the rest of us. But it did cause some bad feeling...

Suddenly there was some movement on the stage: some huge sprays of flowers were lovingly and carefully arranged at strategic points on the stage and then I was amused to see some shiny silver cups and a silver pot brought on to the stage and then some drink ( was it really Coca-Cola?) poured into the coffee pot! Oh dear, this was all most peculiar to me. Then, at last, something again rather unusual if not bizarre happened which gave some real relief to my feelings...A couple of “stage-shifters” came on and removed this beautiful leather chair from the centre of the stage and took it away completely. In its place they brought on this rather old-looking chair which I suppose could be described kindly as “comfortable and well-lived in!” It was Bapak’s chair: the one Bapak preferred. I so liked him for that! For me, it went some way to saving the occasion because it suggested a man who did not care that much (if at all) for the luxury all around him. Certainly, comfort was more important here! This was confirmed for me when Bapak arrived centre stage. As he appeared I heard someone behind me gasp “ Amazing moment!” It was said with real excitement, probably awe. I simply felt interest. Then as Bapak sat down his face was suddenly transformed by this huge, gloriously happy smile. It was as if his whole face was smiling and it just made you feel so, so happy! Lovely. Then as he settled quietly into his chair, waiting for the polite introductions, the formal start that characterised such meetings, I looked carefully at the quiet, immaculately suited figure in front of me. I felt he really was unfussed by whatever was going on around him; that he would be equally at home ANYWHERE. ( I later read John Bennett say much the same thing when he first met Bapak at an airport. See his book “Witness”) He looked slowly around at all of us in front of him. There were several hundred of us, maybe even a thousand. I would have loved to have known his thoughts but there was not a clue...

I do not remember anything at all of the talk now. I am told that is the least important part of the occasion and I can believe it. I do remember admiring the little group of interpreters who sat next to Bapak... They had the unenviable task of translating Bapak's Indonesian into English: unenviable because Bapak talked for 15 to 20 minutes at a time ( I actually timed it) before pausing for a translation! The whole talk lasted for about 3 hours. It could be something of an endurance test. Initially, I was enthralled by Bapak's voice which sounded rich and every now and again it felt as if he was confiding some important secrets to me. Unfortunately, I came away from the talk without any clues as to what those secrets might be! Some people said they had slept through the talk; others said that was the best way to listen to a Bapak talk (meaning with the subconscious but, I think, it was probably just boredom that led them to doze off!). Bapak's talks are long, rather repetitive affairs- some people say they listen to them because there is usually something in them which surprises them and speaks particularly to them. I have not really found that so for myself, however. Bapak has said that his talks are designed to "quieten the heart and mind." Many of the ideas in Bapak's talks may sound strange to Western ears. Many of them, too, I simply cannot accept but I guess some people might say that's because I have not listened to them in the right way which I take to mean uncritically. I consider critical intelligence to be a God-given gift and any encouragement to abandon it has, in my opinion, been clearly shown to be a folly and even sometimes just plain dangerous. I think the history of modern times clearly proves this. To be uncritical in Subud is not dangerous like this but I think it leads to narrow-mindedness and a separating of oneself from the world outside of Subud. Enough of this for now but be warned there is more of this to come later!

Suffice to say I came away from my first Bapak talk with mixed feelings and thoughts. I had been surprised but I could not say pleasantly so. The venue seemed inappropriate for a charity, let alone a "religious"( however one might define that term) event. I suppose the question remains: "Where else could you cope with up to 1000 people in reasonable comfort?" I had no answer to that question. The talk itself had little impact on me. I got bored with the long Indonesian bits and could not really say much about the English translations! 3 hours of that was heavy going for me. I did like this man called Bapak, though. Yes I would never forget that smile which seemed to take you completely out of yourself: momentarily I forgot all my worries, concerns and preoccupations and seemed to be full of smiles myself! You simply had to smile back when faced with such a grin!

I sat rather more quietly on the way back in the rattling car. There was so much in this Subud that I did not really understand or, if I were honest, that I did not much like. I was told just to give it time. It would all make sense later, when I had more experience. Yes that made sense... The only trouble was it simply was not to be true. Of course much MUCH else was to happen first and there was most certainly to be a lot more experience. My next “experience” soon came: it was my first latihan in the presence of Bapak and about 100 or more men. Usually my latihans were with 1 other man!

### *Latihan With Bapak And About 100 Men*

Now this occasion was to be a highlight of my Subud life. I would remember it for the rest of my days for I was rarely to reach such heights in my entire Subud life. And one of those, too, was to be in Bapak’s presence many years later at what was, probably, the lowest point of my life. At this time, however, life was not at all bad. I was experiencing more in my inner life than ever before- and all because of this amazing phenomenon called the Subud latihan. My outer life whilst not by any means perfect was, I thought, fairly settled. I had a secure and worthwhile job, two lovely children just growing out of “toddlerhood” (my daughter, was just about to start school; my son was already there. Both seemed happy and healthy); my wife was often puzzling to me but I thought that was in the nature of such relationships. She was now back in full time work so our money worries were over. Yes, I can remember thinking this was probably one of the most settled and easiest times of my life. Alas, it was to last only for a few more months- then it was as if all hell was to break loose. I had nothing but positive thoughts, however, about my life as I set off once again for a Subud trip to London, this time to experience a latihan with a large group of men in Bapak’s presence.

This time I was to drive to Colchester where I was to leave my car and, once again, be driven to London for another roller-coaster ride in the little green Citroen! I did not know Colchester very well so, although I had instructions, everything became chaotic when suddenly I found myself unexpectedly trapped on what seemed to be a huge one way system. Within minutes, and without too much time to spare I realised I was hopelessly lost. These were pre-Sat Nav days! Feeling panicky and extremely anxious I realised I just had to ask for help. Colchester was much bigger than I thought and I have to say I did not feel too hopeful: people I had asked in similar situations usually turned out to be tourists

or, for some other reason, as ignorant as myself. I have since learnt that Subud seems to introduce another influence into the proceedings so that things can go surprisingly fortuitously or, equally, a series of unlikely difficulties can prevent a thing from happening altogether. At this point in my journey I began to fear the worst: more than likely I was going to be too late for my connection and I would end up going home somewhat disappointed. I pulled up at some traffic lights which had just turned to red. I saw a couple of people ahead of me but they were on the wrong side of the car for me to ask easily. Damn! And then I could not believe it: the lady in front walked immediately in front of my car, right by my door. It looked as if she was coming over to me on purpose! I had earlier thought I would probably be better off asking the man (a woman might feel more vulnerable) but he remained out of earshot, so I opened my window and asked for the way. Then came the biggest surprise of all. "It's probably better if I take you," she said and promptly got in the car next to me! I have to say I have been in a similar plight many times but this is the only time I have ever been given such help. Within minutes I was at my pick up point with time to spare. My lady helper refused my offer to drive her somewhere nearer where she wanted to be, so I simply thanked her profusely and watched her disappear along the street! Panic over!

The rest of the journey was, thankfully, uneventful and, after a couple of hours or so, there we were, taking off our shoes as we always did before the latihan. I guess this, too, is simply an Eastern tradition but it was one I liked. It seemed somehow better to me to leave one's outdoor shoes behind, not only in the interests of cleanliness, but it could also make you feel a bit more relaxed. It reminds me now of that lady I know who does not allow anyone into her house unless they take off their shoes by the door. She once even gave me a spotless pair of socks to put over my own socks before I was allowed in! I am less particular about it these days (the lady I know *isn't*!) I do not always remove my shoes for latihan now but most Subud folk do. I also remember making sure I had not even the suggestion of a hole in my socks before I went to my first latihan only to find the chap next to me was standing in socks with holes so big in them that both his big toes were rather dramatically exposed! No such adventures this time. We were all properly groomed, well feet-wise anyway!

And so this large latihan of 100 men or so got underway. Almost straight away, there rose this tremendous sound as they all seemed to start shouting and running round at once! Wow, what a racket! Then I seemed to become aware of two views... From the outside all seemed to be chaos

(literally!). From the inside? These appearances of disharmony –of sounds and movements- were, in fact, experienced as the varied expressions of a BEAUTIFUL, JOYFUL, TOTAL, INNER HARMONY!!! Wow! (again!) my spirit soared in the real, joyful experience of this Inner Harmony which was in myself. I realised through this experience that there is an INNER HARMONY in life!!! What a discovery this seemed to me: life was not how it seemed. Whatever there was on the outside, in appearance, there was also an Inner story and this I now knew was of harmony and great happiness. My latihan continued with this feeling of real joy causing me to sing and dance: I had not experienced before such prolonged happiness coming simply from within myself. I felt I was now experiencing life more deeply than I had ever done before and I had discovered that at the heart of life, life at its deepest level, there was happiness, joy and absolute harmony.

Next, I realised that the apparent disharmonies of worldly life-the wars, the greed, the violence, the selfishnesses etc. etc,-were like the movements and noises of this large latihan (!) They were MANIFESTATIONS OF INNER HARMONY. This inner harmony was so real in this latihan that I simply could not doubt this!

Then when people moved near me with their varied experiences of latihan: some singing beautifully, some shouting brutishly, some passing by quietly etc. etc. it was like the varied experiences of life which came and went. This included the shocks, surprises, fears, anxieties, joys etc of life. All of these came from the same place: from that same PROFOUND HARMONY that I now knew was the basis of life. Somehow it felt now as if I would never again be at the mercy of whatever happened in my life. I now knew there was Something More to life and that life had a Depth that I had somehow missed up until now. I felt sure now that anything that life brought me would not be so overwhelming or unbearable or as all-important as before. What life brought was but the changing expression of an Unchanging Harmony whose existence I could no longer doubt.

Finally, I then realised that my own movements, singing, noises etc. of my own latihan were my contribution to the world's chaos! I felt they just could not be anything else. In other words I saw-not for the first or last time- that I simply could not be perfect. I would also contribute to the world's misery, ugliness, chaos. As a human being I could not help it. I could try not to, of course, and that, too, would be right but clearly perfection was elsewhere- at the Heart of Life; in the Inner. I was simply part of the chaos- a rightful part!

Once again the journey home simply flew by. Although we were not to get home until the early hours of the morning I was too elated to be tired. This Subud was truly a breathtaking experience! I remember we saw a fox run across the lonely Suffolk road at one point: How beautiful he looked! How wonderful the whole world seemed! Yes I was really getting on with this Subud: really learning a lot. Surely my life would never be the same again...

*Another Self-Revelation- And Some Obvious Benefits; The Spread Of Subud; Testing*

A week later I was back at Ipswich again. This time there were 4 of us altogether- for the group this was a full house! Compared to the London latihan it could hardly be more of a contrast. Nevertheless this latihan was as strong and energising as ever and, not for the last time, I was to feel convinced of the reality of the Subud latihan simply because of its strength and obvious authenticity in both myself and this little group of men that I was lucky enough to share it with. After this latihan, the group decided that it was time now to see if it would be alright for me to latihan at home on my own. The usual advice is that once the latihan is established in a person then as well as having two group latihan one should also have a third latihan at home on ones own each week. I was later to find this an invaluable practice and often my home latihan were very different from my experience of the group ones. I have come to think that one's home latihan are more for oneself than the group ones which, maybe, are more to do with everyone's needs etc. in the group. Anyway that experience was still to come... This latihan was about "testing" whether it was O.K. for me to latihan alone now. "Testing" is an important word in Subud. It refers to the practice of asking a question of the latihan whilst in a receiving state. So what usually happens is that at the end of a "normal" latihan (if there is such a thing!) everyone stands up again as if getting ready to begin the latihan again. This time, though, a question is asked of the latihan and everyone taking part simply receives their latihan in response to the question. So on this occasion one of the group asked "Would it be appropriate for John to latihan at home on his own now?" It was clear from the responses of the group that this would not be a good thing. People receive answers in a variety of ways: some in noises; some in movements etc. all of which carry meaning to the person concerned. After the question was asked, I immediately received an image of myself as being extremely tall, looking down on the town where we were. It did not feel good! Then I understood from it that I was seeing myself as "too big for my boots," again, too superior, too arrogant

towards the people around me and it was more important for me to learn, again, that I was not better than anyone else. I realised then that, in fact, I was just like everyone else- too selfishly concerned, mentally, with my own latihan experience. This was so obviously the truth that I felt I had again learnt something important about myself; I did not feel disappointed or anything negative at all. In fact I felt freer and humbler after the testing. I had much more to learn about the value of testing but this was still to come. I guess this occasion was a first taste for me... Once again, it looked as if the latihan was trying to get me to face the obvious pride, the selfishness, that was in me and just to face it was humbling and acceptable. That is just what we are like as human beings. The latihan it seemed was making sure I did not forget it! It actually felt good, a relief to feel I was no different from anyone else in this! I was to experience this many times in my Subud life and every time, instead of filling me with feelings of shame and inadequacy (as might have been expected) recognising my egotism made me feel happy- as if a burden had been taken away from me! Interestingly, too, it was my practice at this time to read from a collection of Bapak's talks on the bus as I travelled to work each morning. The next morning Bapak's words particularly struck me:

“Actually, any feeling of superiority, any action that signifies we consider that we are more than other people is actually a very great danger”

Bapak clearly applied this to himself also for in the same talk he says: “Treat me as an ordinary man. Do not regard me as someone more than yourself because the only one who is more than we are is Almighty God.” (Pewart magazine)

I was beginning to learn how secretive this feeling of superiority could be and how much it seemed that the latihan wanted it out in the open for then it seemed to lose its power. For me it then made me feel closer to other people and much more compassionate towards all of us “flawed” human beings. This seemed- and still does- a potentially right way for all of us human beings to go forward together much more positively. I think now of all the awareness psychology has given us about the importance and role of the ego and such matters as self-esteem and its importance for a happy and successful life. Subud-again not for the first time- was to work for me like some sort of psychological therapy that added to both my understanding of myself and what it means to be a human being. Always, too, it carried with it the feeling that its insights were undisputedly true. Even better, and this such therapies did not always do, these insights brought clear changes to the personality which, as I was soon to find out, were noticeable to other people. A number of my friends



were to say how much less shy and tense, more self-contained, I had become; 2 were to ask what had happened to bring this about and, later, this was (partly) to lead one friend to explore Subud for himself-much to my surprise as I thought it would be the last thing he would be interested in! That was to happen a little later and is a Subud story in itself. I will come back to this and I love telling it because it is a clear example of how Subud can spread: by personal example and contact rather than advertising or any sort of recruitment, “hype” or “spin” or any of those other words that we are so used to these days and which tell so much about our present society. Subud is quite unlike anything I have come across in this respect. It has endured even in these “media-mad” times without any attempts to advertise or recruit. Sometimes the way people come to find Subud is amazing in itself and sometimes against all the (rational) odds. It often provides evidence in itself of something powerful and unusual being involved. In my own case when I first heard of Subud as a teenager I lived in a large town, a short train ride from London. It would have been easy to locate a group then. I remember, too, that my favourite, well-stocked, bookshop at that time had a whole section of shelves about Subud. I passed them all by: I was not interested then. Of course, years later, when I was interested, I was living in a village in Suffolk where no-one I knew had even heard of Subud. This surprised me because many of my friends were into “New Age” or alternative therapies and lifestyles. Even that very same “well-stocked” bookshop now had not one Subud book. It was then that a series of improbable happenings occurred and there came that reply from a now non-existent Subud address. Even Subud itself did not know there was that little group meeting 30 odd miles away from me. I repeat this here because I think it shows clearly how Subud can spread- by strange coincidences, (“synchronicity”- Jung’s term- comes nearest to “explaining” this, I think) and without any concern for the ways our society deems necessary for such things to happen nowadays. There are no spin- doctors here; no huge amounts of money spent on advertising (“prime” time or otherwise!). I think that it is something of a minor miracle that without any of this Subud has continued, since its explosion here in the 60’s, to attract new members and continues to be an International organisation with small groups in most countries of the world. I am told that the membership in this country has remained at about the 1000 mark all that time so that as members have left, died or whatever new members have replaced them: the figure I have heard most often for the world-wide membership is 10000 but I have absolutely no idea of how accurate or not those figures are.

### *Some More Experiences*

Meanwhile my Ipswich latihans continued. Occasionally, they would take me unexpectedly to new experiences. I remember it was about this time that I had a “funny little experience” of my legs moving less because of me and more with what I can only describe as with the power of the latihan (many would say the power of God). Again, it made me feel extremely happy and I can remember I just laughed and laughed! Sometimes in the latihan I would laugh almost uncontrollably and it would feel as if I had just heard the best joke in the world. The trouble was I did not have a clue what the joke was! This was not to be the last time that I was to learn what REAL laughing was like. Then there was one particular latihan which was so different from any others I was having at the time that it took me completely by surprise: I felt ice-cold, in alternate pain and despair and generally suffering horribly. After the latihan we tested about whether my wife should have an operation on her throat as the doctor was considering. My testing was not altogether clear to me but it turned out that there was one man there who received very clearly that she should go ahead and that my own latihan had been largely a response to her condition! This once again was a reminder to me that our latihans are not just about ourselves but as this one shows they may also be about the people around us. In fact, I began to see now that the idea that the latihan was so often chaotic and unpleasant-sounding because it reflects the chaotic forces in the world at present, might well be true. Yes I saw that as quite a plausible idea now!

My latihans were not limited to the group ones. They could come upon me at any time. I often went out for a walk across the fields near to where I lived and find myself bellowing to the sky or to some unexpected oak tree or crow! I loved these open air latihans. I can also remember walking round our country park and NOT feeling any resentment or “claustrophobia” because of all the tourists about (as I usually did!). I actually found myself enjoying these people! Instead of ignoring them I found myself talking with them and feeling no different from them. Perhaps I really had lost some of my “superiority”? Then I remember suddenly experiencing the latihan while sitting on the “loo!” and it felt as if I was having some sort of throat operation. I had, in fact, had a troublesome throat infection for over a week previously. Only now was it to begin to get better..! There have been many stories of Subud “healings” especially in its early days, I think. For myself, I have only experienced a “small” healing: every year for as long as I could remember every cold I got would leave me with weeks sometimes of catarrhal deafness. It became a real nuisance. After some time of the latihan, this problem rather mysteriously disappeared for years, only to return very

occasionally and in a much less severe form. I did also witness a very unusual healing in someone else, an elderly, kindly man whom I saw rather irregularly. On my second visit to see him I was alarmed to see him in a wheelchair with the likelihood of more deterioration ahead of him. He wrote to Bapak for advice which led to his changing his diet and having regular moments of latihan during the day. Months later I went to a Subud meeting and there he was walking unaided across the stage, apparently completely well. I lost contact with him a year or so later at which point he was as active as ever.

Well my early experiences in Subud had convinced me of the power, reality and authenticity of this remarkable latihan. My first year ended with an image I had of myself having landed a huge fish which was still struggling on the bank. Any angler would have been pleased to have landed such a big fish but I could see it was not yet safely brought in. It still seemed to be very powerful and flapping all over the place! This seemed to be a very apt and clear symbol of my relationship with Subud at this time.

So much had happened, inwardly, to me I could scarcely believe it. Outwardly, my life seemed fairly settled and uneventful. All that was to change and the inner dramas I had experienced were now to be matched by some amazing outer ones.