

Early Discontents

How They 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- and I will be forever grateful for it. I was advised *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. If that had happened to me I do not think I would be telling this story!

Yet, even here in this wise group, I was surprised to find myself confronted, a week before my opening, 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 them.) 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, at the 1971 World Congress, that even an atheist could take part in the latihan! (Cilandak Congress 12th. Talk where Bapak said to a doctor present: "Yes, you may join even if you do not believe") 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 my latihan. 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. Anyway, this meant that I had the responsibility of representing the group at what were called “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?