

FIRST LATIHANS

And so the day of my “opening” was here. This is the word used to describe your first latihan with a Subud group. You sit quietly with members of your own sex for about ten minutes or so, then you stand still while a person more experienced than you reads out a statement about the latihan and your wish to take part. Then you are asked to say: “I believe in Almighty God and wish only to worship Him” or “I wish to believe in Almighty God and to worship Him”. In one of his talks in Cilandak in 1976, Bapak, the founder of Subud (more about him later) made it clear that even an atheist can be welcomed into Subud: sincerity is more important than belief or the wish to believe. Many people at the talk witnessed Bapak introduce a self-proclaimed atheist to the latihan (i.e “opened” him in Subud parlance) whereupon the man fell upon his knees and in tears excitedly announced that he now “understood”! It was clearly a life-changing moment for the atheist and a delightful tribute to the power of the latihan to all present.

My own first latihan was a surprisingly low key affair as, I am told, it is for many people. There were more people there than usual because people had come down from Norwich to be part of this special occasion. Openings are usually seen as special and later, when I took part in other people’s first latihan, I experienced how different, indeed special, they could be for people already “used to” the latihan experience. My own opening was quiet, still and uneventful for me. I just stood still the whole time and experienced very little for myself- except for the latihan of the people around me. Someone was shouting something I could not understand (it sounded loud and unpleasant); someone else was running around the room making what I can only describe as little whoops of joy! Most captivating of all for me was the man I sensed as next to me on my right (one is advised to close one’s eyes in the latihan, possibly to avoid unnecessary distraction): he was singing what sounded like a monkish chant. I had always enjoyed the recording I had of some Gregorian chants and this was a bit like that. The joy of it for me was to feel that I was actually witnessing a chant being, I was sure, spontaneously made up and sung on the spot! It was not a chant I had heard before or was ever likely to hear again. The whole point of the Subud latihan is simply to relax as much as one can manage, try to maintain an open mind without thinking of anything in particular and

certainly without trying to control one's mind or anything like that: in fact to try to decrease one's self-will so that it simply becomes a willingness to follow whatever may happen. One is never out of control (though it may appear like that to others!) or without one's critical faculties. One remains as the witnessing self- with rather more to "witness" than less for a lot of the time. So, although nothing much happened to me in this latihan in the sense that I did not sing, dance, shout, run or leap around, chant, pray or make horrendous noises (all of which I was to do later!) I did feel the authenticity of the latihan of the people around me and especially of the "chanter." So, after my opening, I felt pleased to have taken part and with no doubts about the spontaneous power and authenticity of this Subud latihan.

My second group latihan a few days later could not have been more different. Even the venue was a contrast. My first latihan had been in a low-ceilinged, timber-framed hall that belonged to the Unitarian church (Quaker halls are most often hired, I think). I guess this is because most groups have only a small number of members who cannot, although in general they would like to, afford their own Subud hall. For my second latihan, I travelled to one of the most attractive of little Suffolk villages where a long-standing Subud member had kindly made her beautiful old cottage available to us. I walked to the cottage along a quiet, sleepy street: mostly deserted except for a row of ducklings following their mother along the middle of the street, presumably to the mill pond at the bottom. What a beautiful rural setting! At my first latihan there had been a gathering of about 10 or more men; at this there was myself and...one other man! And what a latihan this turned out to be for me.

Suddenly I started singing wordlessly, powerfully, noisily but not disharmoniously. And miraculously, the song seemed to originate in my chest, not my mouth! It, again, carried a delightful range of feelings with it: real happiness (lovely!), exuberance and a sense of well-being which seemed to have to express itself through me in this way. Somehow, too, it made me feel confident in expressing myself like this- thoughts about what my companion was making of it or of how disturbing this might be for other people in this sleepy village were soon dismissed with an over-riding sense of "all rightness" and as "trivial" compared to the enormity of this experience FOR ME!!! I was singing in a way that I had only done once before- in the car coming back from my first visit to the Ipswich group. And this time it was "in company," without embarrassment and, more clearly than ever, from outside my will or even my

mouth! Yes, this came from my heart in some strange way...After the latihan quietened down, I felt incredibly excited. This was a new and remarkable thing that had dramatically come into my life, this Subud latihan. As I finally calmed down and drove home, I just wondered whatever was going to happen next...

Very quickly, my two latihan at Ipswich became the highlight of my week. I looked forward immensely to them. Generally, there were 4 of us there at most, sometimes just 2. Numbers just did not seem to matter: my latihan was equally strong no matter how many people were there. Interestingly, too, I found myself latihan-singing for the whole 50 minute journey there and back so by the end of an evening I had experienced nothing less than 2 hours latihan. Generally, this would be considered “excessive.” To me, it was completely spontaneous and the most natural thing in the world. I do remember some occasions when, at the end of the journey home, I felt that my mind had been taken to its limit and just one more bit of latihan and I would have gone “over the top,” mad: I would have lost my mind. This never happened but I had no doubt I had been taken as far as I could go. Most times, though, I felt as many people do after the latihan: energised, content in myself, happy and pleasantly relaxed “like a cat curled up in front of the fire.”

Little did I know then that my life was going to change as dramatically outwardly as it had already begun to inwardly...