

MY FIRST BAPAK TALK

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 him and 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 CV 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 naive 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 (hundreds of them) and the huge stage at the front seemed overwhelmed by these long (20 feet?) 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 a donation towards the cost of hiring the hall for the evening which was £20,000 (this was nearly 40 years ago!) I could not help myself from flinching. Not for the last time did I ask myself if I really wanted to belong to a group that could justify spending such an 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 this not 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 up to the still vacant rows of chairs at the front, saw that they were reserved and so angrily turned 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 by reserving seats for a variety of people: Bapak’s family, overseas visitors etc. rather than letting 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 even more unusual happened which was to give some much needed relief to my feelings...A couple of “stage-shifters” came on and removed this beautiful leather chair from 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 liked him for this preference! For me, it went some way to saving the occasion so far because it suggested to me that here was a man who did not care that much for the luxury all around him. Certainly, comfort seemed 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, perhaps awe. I simply felt interest. Then as Bapak sat down his face suddenly transformed into this huge, gloriously happy smile. It was as if his entire face was smiling and it just made me feel so, so happy just to see it! 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 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 then but I had not a clue.

Then he began talking. I do not remember anything of the talk now at all. I am told that is the least important part of the occasion anyway 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 15-20 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 then it felt as if he was confiding some important secrets to me. Unfortunately, I came away from the talk without any idea 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 mind but I could not help mischievously thinking it might have been boredom that led them to doze off!) Many of the ideas in Bapak's talks may sound strange to Western ears. They are long 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 this so for myself, however. Bapak has said that his talks are designed to "quieten the heart and mind" rather than to stimulate debate or argument and that is how I like to view them and why I am happy just listening to the Indonesian without the translation! After a short time I invariably then feel the latihan.

I came away from my first Bapak talk with mixed feelings and thoughts. I had been surprised but not always pleasantly so. The venue seemed inappropriate for a charity, let alone a "religious" one. I suppose then the question remains: "Where else could you cope with 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 after about an hour and I 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 special smile which seemed to take me completely out of myself: momentarily, I forgot 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 was honest, did not much like. I was told to just give it time: it would all make sense later, when I had more experience. Yes, I could accept that...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. The next "experience" came very soon after this one...