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Practice Makes Perfect

Subud is a homegrown belief system that has spread from its Javanese roots around the world. Chad Bouchard reports.



I had no idea what was happening," Raymond van Sommers says of his first experience with Subud, a spiritual exercise introduced to the world more than 60 years ago by an Indonesian.

Speaking to me over the phone from his home office overlooking Sydney's Sailor Bay, the 79-year-old carefully sifts through memories of a

June day in 1957, when the movement's founder first came to Coomb Springs, UK.

In a darkened room scented with the faint aroma of clove cigarettes, Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo asked with little explanation for van Sommers and a half-dozen other students to close their eyes, relax and begin. The group received what Subud members call an Opening.

Subud involves standing in a quiet room and focusing on one's connection with God or the Great Life Force within. As each person makes contact with the divine, he or she moves or speaks spontaneously. These sessions are known simply as *latihan* or training.

"But it was strange for me to do that; to just surrender to the power of God, and just let go," van Sommers recalls. "And then to find myself slightly moving and hearing other people making noises and so on."

Subud is a contraction of the words *Susila*, *Budhi* and *Dharma*. Van Sommers writes in his book *A Life in Subud* that the three together mean: to follow the will of God with the help of the divine power that works both within us and without, by surrendering oneself to the Will of Almighty God.

The movement was founded by *Pak Subuh* after an experience he had in 1925 during a late night walk. He looked up to see a brilliant sunburst falling into his body. After surrendering to what he thought would be his death, he found his body was impelled to stand and perform his Muslim prayers.

Pak Subuh said this guided involuntary movement happened to him for 1000 consecutive nights after.

Subud followers emphasize that latihan can be combined with any formal religion, from Islam to Buddhism.

In 1957, Subud exploded in Europe. It piggybacked with a self-actualization movement started in the 19th century by Armenian-Greek mystic named Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff.

But van Sommers says the latihan sort of turned the exercises of Gurdjieff on their head. Instead of practicing external movements to wake up the

Profile
Healing Hands

consciousness, the latihan was like a direct line to reality, which comes from the inside.

Life
Pedicab
Philosophers
Happy Trails

Subud is not Indonesian

As I tour Subud's pleasant, flowery compound in Cilandak, South Jakarta, I'm thinking this spiritual practice seems peculiarly Indonesian in many ways. After all, like the founding philosophy of Pancasila, it emphasizes belief in One God, but embraces many religions. And during the latihan, members are separated into male and female groups, just as they are in mosques.

Music
Sounds of the
City
Poptastic!

As soon as we sit down to chat, however, several leaders of the Subud community tell me I'm totally wrong.

She's Got
Rhythm
Spicing up the
music scene

Bapak's son Haryono Sumohadiwidjojo reminds me that Subud caught on faster in Europe than here. The leaders also insist the separation of sexes has nothing to do with Islam, and is merely an attempt to keep people from getting distracted by sexuality.

Strings
Attached

Van Sommers, however, reluctantly acknowledges some parallels. "It took on some of the flavor of the background of Indonesian culture."

**Vanneque on
Wine**
The Hunt for
Great Chilean
Wines

He believes Subud initially grew more quickly in the West because that was where the need was. With a generation of Westerners losing confidence with the dogmas of their religions, he says, many were hungry for a direct experience.

Dinner is Served
Haute Potatoes

"Because the thinking ties up things in neat packages and puts labels on things and so on. It quietens with the latihan, and enables the feelings to awaken. Indonesians I think live much more in their normal way from their feelings. So perhaps in that sense I think it was natural for it to have come through an Indonesian."

On a Jet Plane
Island of
Discoveries

Over the last 10 years, the movement has seen a surge back in the mother archipelago. Of the some 15,000 active members worldwide, about 4,000 of them are in Indonesia.

This Way Out
Good vibrations

That intrigues me. What's causing this new growth?

Fashion
Modern
Makeover

Not your father's Subud

When *Pak* Subuh died in 1987, he left a hole in the organization that many felt would be hard to fill. Membership in Indonesia dropped to about half. Many foreign members living in Jakarta and at the Cilandak compound went home.

20/20
'The spice of life
is a loving
heart'

"Well we were worried at that time," Haryono remembers. "Many people felt we were like chicks without their mother. So we were like peck peck peck all around. But in the end we decided we still had to make the latihan available for mankind."

In an office tucked in a corner of the campus, I meet Ary Sutedja, the culture coordinator for Subud in Indonesia, a concert pianist, and bit of a Balinese firecracker. She's also puzzled by the surge in membership in Indonesia, and suggests there's no clear answer.

"This is what we're trying to find out. Why is this organization which is already all over the world -- in the home country where it begins 60 years ago -- not respected as it should be. What's happening? What's wrong?"

But she describes a buzz in the movement among Indonesian members in recent years, and a search for direction.

"Hopefully there is a slight reform in the organization."

The problem, Ary says, is that Subud does not allow proselytizing. *Bapak* was clear that *latihan* should not be forced on anyone. People who are curious about Subud have to meet it at least half way. There's no teaching, no text, and no real system. That leaves it wide open to misinterpretation.

Subud is not meant to be a new religion, and is not a cult. The *latihan* is not meditation, and it's not a method which has to be taught. Through charitable work in places like Yogyakarta's earthquake recovery zone and in Aceh, the organization is spreading that message along with its programs.

"People always put Subud in a box," said Ary. "But it's challenging because what we are looking at is how to clear this misunderstanding by doing things. By talking to the people, community, nations. And that's what we plan to do."

Subud is not a banana

The members and elders tell me *Bapak* was kind and generous, but they also describe a bit of a jokester.

"Usually at some point in a talk he had us shaking with laughter," said van Sommers. "Not only with his words but his mime also was hilarious. *Bapak* brought with him, like most Indonesians I knew, a lightness of feeling."

His son Haryono tells me about a student of his father who, during the fasting month of Ramadhan, complained about his hunger.

Bapak asked the student how he broke his fast in the evening. The student answered, "with bananas and rice".

"Then *Bapak* asked 'so how do you eat the banana?' 'Well, I usually peel and then eat it.' 'Well that is wrong,' *Bapak* said. 'To avoid hunger, you should eat the banana with all the skin.'"

Not knowing *Pak* Subuh was being facetious, the student came back complaining that a banana is very hard to swallow with the peel still on it. Haryono laughs from his belly. "Sometimes the followers are very serious." The story reminds me how fragile the relationship between a student and a leader can be, especially in spiritual practices.

Spiritual seekers are sometimes looking for a spiritual dictator. Subud, I am told, doesn't work like that. Subud is do-it-yourself. If you need a bossy autocrat to lay down the law and give you an instruction sheet, you'll be let down. And you may get a stomach ache.

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