

SUBUD VISION WORKSHOPS AT INTERNATIONAL 'THANK YOU' GATHERING: ASCOT, AUGUST '07

I think it is fair to say that Subud's organisational culture encourages 'harmony' as an important value. This can mean that dissenting voices, or those that question or challenge, are often not given encouragement or recognition. The purpose of the Subud Vision workshops at the international 'Thank You' celebration was to build on the work started in the Subud Vision website by giving members from many countries a chance to meet and talk about their views on what needs to change within Subud. They were given space to discuss the issues, attitudes and practices that need to be challenged to ensure Subud survives and thrives in the future.

Stefan Freedman volunteered to host these workshops, and was pleased when Sophia Blake, a professional facilitator from Australia, emailed offering to join him in running the workshops. They met each other for the first time the day before the workshop ran.

Sophia says: 'Given more time to think about it, we might have structured the workshops differently. The format we used for the second, smaller workshop was more conducive to airing a wide range of dissenting views, and given our time again, this might have been a better format for both workshops. However the informal feedback we received indicates that many Subud members felt they were given good opportunity to speak out.'

Workshop 1

The first workshop attracted approximately fifty people. The original venue we were given was taken from us and given over to Ibu Rahayu's video talk for the 'Thank You' celebration. Given the tough competition offered by the talk, and the last minute change of venue, we thought the numbers were good.

As a warm up, we asked people to say: If Subud were an animal. what kind would it be and why? Some responses were:

- A snail - slow moving with impenetrable shell
- A dove - in essence beautiful, peaceful, ability to soar
- A tiger - has claws and teeth and doesn't quite know what to do with these tools. Depending on how you perceive them, these qualities can be used for maintaining well-being or else for destructive purposes.
- A giraffe - the head (office holders) far removed from the body (grassroots members)

We then asked people to form groups of six in which each person would tell a story which represented his/her vision for the future of Subud. Storytelling allows people the freedom to operate at different levels. They can create a future drawn from concrete events in their past experience, or enter a more creative space in which they can imagine a future which scarcely seems possible at this point in time. The format for this exercise was to construct a story around the following 'spine':

Once upon a time.../ Every day...(Describe current situation)

Until one day...(Catalysing action)

Because of that...(Consequences)

Because of that...(Consequences)

Because of that...(repeat as needed)

Until finally...(Outcome)

There was a real buzz around the room as people told their tales. Then each group was asked to select one story from their group which they felt was significant and to share it with the rest of the room.

The stories are too long and complex to recount in full but the general themes from five of the groups were:

- A story of a Subud group which started to free up, hold parties, invite non-Subud people to their parties and make a point of attending other peoples' parties. They were surprised to find that having fun together was fulfilling to current members and that new people were becoming attracted.
- A real life account of a visit to a new Subud group in Eastern Europe where, due to lack of translations, Bapak's talks and traditional Subud culture (e.g. Indonesian and Islamic influence) were virtually unknown. The visitor was impressed by the vibrant sense of community and the way in which the latihan stood by itself very strongly, without contextualisation.
- A story about what a haphazard, messy organisation Subud is, but that somehow everything seems to find a way of working out, though not at all in the way expected.
- A tale - reported as factual - about a new member from a Buddhist tradition for whom English was a second language. He appeared to enter Subud, much to the helpers' concern, having understood very little of what had been explained about it. To their surprise, after his opening he exclaimed succinctly: 'Now understand! Empty!'
- A tale using an orchestra as a metaphor for Subud. Each member received a different instrument. Some weren't sure what the instruments were designed for and used them to poke and hit each other. Later, after some time, some are learning to play rather well. Other people are asking: Who is your teacher? Eventually, they hope to play co-operatively as a full orchestra and produce beautiful music, but practice is necessary.

One group reported that they had found the story approach constraining and chose to discuss their current Subud issues and personal concerns.

We then asked people to write on a post-it note their priority issue to advance their personal vision of Subud. Related issues were grouped together and identified as a theme. The themes identified are listed below along with a direct quote of what was written on each post-it note:

- **More Open Discussion** (11 items) More publicity; Honest dialogue; Openness and transparency; Openness to each others' lives outside Subud; Natural friendly communication with everyone; Subud members to feel more confident to share candidly with Subud and non-Subud members; Open discussion of how the latihan is for us; More sense of community and sociability in groups
- **Impact of Islam / Bapak on culture of Subud** (6 items, quoted as written on post-it notes) Subud should become religiously neutral; Respect for diverse beliefs and ways; Islamic faith needs to feel respect for other ways and not feel only they are right; Integration with other faiths; People should speak from their own experience, not 'Bapak said'; Let's move forward from 'Thank You 2007' with emphasis on being an individual and not an individual Bapak.
- **Surrender and Inner Processes** (5 items) More respect for spontaneous receiving; No testing obligation; More courage to receive the latihan and surrender; We need the latihan that Bapak brought us - not the latihan of the mind; Surrender more.
- **Change** (3 items) A thorough springclean; Less delusion, more reality; Don't be afraid of change; let's welcome it;

- **Helper issues and Applicant process** (5 items) Less helper arrogance; Helpers need to learn how to help each other before advising applicants about Subud; No great long explanations; No probation period; 'Chain of Command' - Get local group helpers to test with us: How are we when we are closed/open to other people's ways of putting things? - then take that question to regional, national
- **Other issues** (2 items) Subud people to stop talking politics; Environmental/economic crisis.

This summary indicates the breadth of issues that members feel is important to their personal vision of the future of Subud. Unsurprisingly, the item with the most popular resonance is the call for 'more open discussion'.

At the end of this first workshop, when each person was invited to say a last word, a lot of people expressed relief at being supported in speaking frankly and realising they weren't isolated in their 'dissenting views'. Two people added that they favoured open debate but would hate to see Subud splitting over it in the way that so many other spiritual groups have done. However, R countered that it's not debate but the absence of communication and the suppression of ideas that causes divisions and splits. One participant suggested we should all look carefully at the 'post-it' note content we had written down, as it reveals as much about ourselves as it does about Subud. Finally, we let people know about Subud Vision - books, projects etc. and about the second session.



Workshop 2

Twenty people came. We should mention here that everyone who wanted to offer a workshop at the ThankYou2007 gathering was allowed to, and at all times there was a vast choice. It was an extensive labyrinth-like site, and even with the site-map, with several buildings on two floors, some people just got too tired to keep dashing around or too lost. Other found themselves bumping into old friends and decided that catching up was as important as going to meetings. Given that there were so many simultaneous options, that people were tired and workshopped-out, and that at that time the biggest competition was the sunshine, which had finally appeared after glum, drizzly days, we were pleased to get twenty people. Especially as almost all of these were well known and currently or formerly very central to the Subud organisation.

As each introduced themselves it became clear that they were very pleased about an initiative for open debate, and concerned about the subtle repression (our words) of certain ideas, and the inappropriate 'face' of Subud that often looks like a cult to the public and masks the simplicity and accessibility of the latihan.

One participant said she hadn't been to group latihan or to Subud gatherings for several years but came to this event specifically because she heard about the Subud Vision workshop. She had wanted to raise things in her group that had been deeply worrying her and was met with: 'I suggest we should all take a few moments to quieten ourselves.' She replied: 'Bugger that!' and walked out in disgust. She explained that it was sanctimonious, smug attitudes that distanced her more than any single issue.

The format of the second workshop was based on 'Open Space' Technology technique, first introduced to Subud by former WSA Chair Daniel Cheifetz. All who wanted to focus on a particular issue would write it on a large piece of paper and then those drawn to the same issue would go to an adjoining room to discuss it. People could change anytime from one group to another. (We had booked several adjoining classrooms for this purpose.)

Topics that came up are listed below, along with a record of the discussion.

Why aren't people coming into Subud?

- No friendliness in groups towards visitors - lack of ordinary human warmth. New members are left on their own.
- Members are too old. Young people are more open-minded and eclectic.
- What's putting young people off? Language! 'God' isn't fashionable. Lack of 'café'-style facilities where people can meet, chat, make friends.
- Subud events need to emphasise the 'gathering', not the official business. Interacting creatively as a community is what nurtures us, rather than splitting into sub-committees and hiving ourselves away with long agendas to get through. Suggest set times for gathering well in advance, so we can plan the year around those dates. Business should be done every second year; every other year is for a 'gathering' only. (This is how they already arrange things in Canada.)
- Family camps are excellent for retaining members over a long time. Art camps for kids and families! Second generation come into Subud if they have happy childhood memories of Subud community events.
- There are more activities and contacts if you are a helper.
- There is a lack of inspiring projects in groups - things have become routine.
- One suggestion for making Subud more available to new people: Compose and publish three separate introductory brochures:
 - one for atheists
 - one for agnostics, freethinkers, or 'waverers'
 - one for believers

Helpers for life?

Groups differ in their interpretation of whether the helper role is life-long or not, and what the mechanisms are for people to move into and out of the helper role. Some experiences from different groups in different countries were shared. Issues and possible solutions discussed were:

- Get everyone to test periodically (e.g every two years) if it is right for them to continue to be a helper.
- Recognise that people can move in and out of the helper role - they don't need to be active all the time.
- Too many people in helper roles can mean too few good candidates are available to fill committee roles.
- Some people no longer contribute as helpers but like to 'hang on' to the title and the perceived power and prestige that it gives them.
- If any helper problems can't be resolved locally, Regional or National Helpers should be called on to help.
- We need to challenge the assumption that helpers are superior to committee members or general members.
- Some helpers do not have the right skills/personality to work with applicants and this needs to be addressed.

How do we deal with conflict/dissent in Subud?

Although there was spirited discussion, a comprehensive record of the discussion was not kept. One general comment however was that Subud had managed to encompass a broad diversity of views and faiths. Churches, when faced with dissenting views, tended to split into different sects as a way of dealing with conflict. Can we handle conflict and dissent more effectively? One member shared problems he encountered when publishing a webpage for his local group - and his perception that this was handled in a heavy-handed way by the Subud national management.

Perhaps we need to develop a protocol for dispute resolution and use the people within Subud who have professional expertise in this area (there are many) to provide skills development for office-holders at local, regional, national and international levels - as well

as for general Subud members who are interested in developing this important life skill.

Is Subud a Cult?

Interestingly, no-one came to this discussion, so it was abandoned. Perhaps because time was limited other topics of interest crowded it out, and it might have attracted people if there had been more time available. Nevertheless it was interesting (and quite surprising) that it was not first choice for nineteen of the twenty people attending.

Stefan's personal reflections at the end of Subud 'Thank You 2007':

These two sessions and many conversations in passing confirm to me that it's not just a small minority that feels uneasy about unanswered questions such as those raised in the meetings and in articles on the Subud Vision website, but that there's a large groundswell of Subud opinion. Many members are discouraged about our lack of growth and are wanting to review our options and get creative. A theme that keeps appearing is the gap between Subud as we present ourselves (no rules, doctrine-free) and Subud as we find ourselves (expectations which appear to be rules, many 'guidelines' which appear like a set of quasi-religious teachings).

Discussions have often been initiated before, but many have experienced these as muted. When they express their personal concerns members can end up feeling judged as 'disharmonious', and their views dismissed rather than evaluated. This includes many people who are known and respected for the roles they play or have played in the organisation. I am very interested in Subud Vision's initiative to enable a robust, unfettered dialogue. This framework is open to diverse feedback and 'dissident' viewpoints. In fact, this - for me - is a key which could bring Subud culture to life.

All the time I was at the 'Thank You' event I felt the latihan more strongly/deeply than ever before. I was at the same time feeling pained about entrenched obstacles to change in Subud. In latihan before the first Subud Vision meeting I had a clear intuition that the 'stalwarts' of Subud who preserve the status quo are as vital to our organisational health as those who are consciously involved in progress. It's a matter of each recognising the mutuality of the two energies (innovation and maintenance) and learning to trust one another.

Sophia Blake and Stefan Freedman