

# I Asked for Milk, Instead of Coffee

## My Encounter with Subud and Enterprise

By Sahlan Diver

As a student of microbiology at Birmingham University, I was a confirmed atheist with no interest in the spiritual or the esoteric. At the start of the 1970 summer term I returned from vacation several days early and finding no other students had arrived back decided to visit my personal tutor. She offered me a cup of coffee but I said that I would prefer a glass of milk. This simple request changed the course of my life.

My tutor asked why I was not a fanatical coffee drinker like every other student she knew. I explained that I had an increasing problem with physical nervousness, which was so bad it was becoming an embarrassment and I was trying to alleviate the symptoms by cutting down on caffeine. My tutor wanted to know whether I had sought any treatment for the condition and I explained how I had consulted a psychiatrist, who had done nothing more for me than a prescription for valium, but on the advice of an Indian student I had taken up practising yoga and had found this to be extremely helpful. Whereupon my tutor said, 'I think I know someone you would be very interested to meet!' That 'someone' turned out to be a teacher in the Gurdjieff technique.

Three things I remember about my meeting with the Gurdjieff man: he chain-smoked, he had beautifully fluid and well-coordinated movement, and he asked whether I had read any books by John Bennett. A technique that Gurdjieff people adopted was to make it difficult for people to join them – it was all part of a test, to find out whether you had enough interest and persistence to be able to make something of 'the Work', as they called it. I was sent away to read books by Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, and told to come back at some time in the future, when I 'might be invited to join a group'.

In those days, before the Internet, finding information on obscure topics could be extremely difficult. The university library had no books on Gurdjieff, and I took to visiting the old Birmingham city centre reference library, sadly now demolished, a grand old Victorian building with an impressive glass dome and a vast, echoing wood-panelled reading hall. Readers would hunt for the books they wanted in a musty card-index system, then a brown coated porter would disappear into the vaults, returning some thirty minutes later with a laden trolley. My course-work was abandoned while I made repeated visits to this library and worked through their entire stock of books on Gurdjieff and related esoteric matters.

On one of the most depressing days of my life, I awoke, fed up with my situation, fed up with myself, and fed up that I still could get no invitation to join a Gurdjieff group. At lunchtime a student whom I didn't like much, was gleefully describing an horrific ancient torture. I felt despairing of human nature and badly needing to read another book on Gurdjieff. The greyness of the winter's day as I travelled to the city centre library reflected my feeling of extreme depression, but there was worse to come! Only one book on Gurdjieff remained that I hadn't read. It was highly critical, full of tales of deception, lust and criminal behaviour. The book claimed that Gurdjieff had been succeeded by something even more disreputable, called 'Subud', whose members 'used the latihan on themselves', resulting in trance-like fits of craziness, smashing up of furniture, jumping out of windows and their frequently having to be interned in mental hospitals. The book did not say what 'the latihan' actually was – I imagined it to be some kind of vicious whip for self-chastisement – Subud was

something to steer well clear of, obviously!\*

Whenever I hear people discussing Gurdjieff, they usually talk of it as an excessively intellectual system. Such remarks give those people away. If they had studied in a Gurdjieff group, rather than just reading about it in books, they would know it is a practical system, full of all sorts of physical, mental and psychological exercises that aim to expose and subsequently purify the self. During the three weekends that I eventually worked with a Gurdjieff group I had experiences of such heightened consciousness and intense awareness that I couldn't imagine I would ever want to stop it. But, fate intervened a second time.

One day while in the university library looking up material for a philosophy essay, I saw by chance on one of the shelves, *Concerning Subud*, by John Bennett. Here were juxtaposed two names I had encountered before – Subud, and the name of the author, John Bennett, mentioned at my first meeting with the Gurdjieff man. I locked myself away in my room and read the book cover to cover in one sitting. I was immediately convinced, but something puzzled me – the book was written in 1957 and talked about a chain reaction, with Subud spreading like wildfire. But it was now fifteen years on and I had never heard of the movement. So, I wrote to the book's publishers. I received a letter in reply, saying that Bennett was now based at an institute in Gloucestershire. I wrote to the institute and received the reply that Bennett was 'no longer in Subud, though fully in sympathy with its aims', and giving me the name of the Subud national office. On contacting the national office I was surprised to find there was a Subud member living just a mile away from me.

I met the man in a pub and remember him as being somewhat offhand. He told me he was leaving the area soon to go to live in Bournemouth. I got the distinct impression he was rather glad to be leaving the Subud group. He was sufficiently on the ball to notice that I was practising my Gurdjieff 'self-remembering' technique while talking to him, and warned me that I would 'have to give all that up' if I wanted to make any progress in the latihan.

The Birmingham Subud group met at a large and very public Quaker Meeting House that hired out many rooms. On latihan nights there might be brass band practise, drama rehearsals, cadet drill, and basketball in the forecourt. There was also a café, run by a charming and friendly tea-lady. Consequently the place had an alive, homely and welcoming feeling, much better than most Subud premises. I had been there before, exactly a year before, on an untypically quiet night, looking for the room where I was to have a music lesson. The place was deserted, and as I listened at each door for the sound of the alto-saxophone (not normally an instrument one has to strain to hear) I heard a most peculiar and unearthly low groaning sound. I have no doubt now that what I heard was the sound of the latihan – is it perhaps too fanciful to think that it was drawing me back exactly one year later? On this occasion I didn't need to ask if the man standing at the front door was a Subud member. I *knew* he was a Subud member. He had very 'open' eyes, just like the picture of Bennett on the back of the *Concerning Subud* book.

My enthusiasm for joining Subud was as keen as it had been for joining Gurdjieff. Throughout the applicant period I visited the group twice a week, on their latihan nights. While the ladies waited for the men to do latihan, I would talk to the ladies and while the men waited for the ladies I would talk to the men; then we would all have tea in the café afterwards. Needless to say, I got to know the group fairly well, even before being opened. I noticed, for example, that the latihan had not erased pride – one helper who visited occasionally was anxious to be considered the senior helper for the area and this was causing the lady helpers in the group quite a lot of upset. Nor had the latihan completely evened temperament – one member describing Bapak as 'that black bastard' for changing the talk times at the last minute

on one of his former visits to Britain.

During my applicant period, a question that had been troubling me got answered. I asked one of the helpers what we should 'do' in Subud, since in Gurdjieff I was used to the notion of busy and energetic work on oneself. He replied that all we needed was to submit, we couldn't help the latihan at all. Although I accepted what he was saying, I found it unsatisfying. Then a young member who had been away at the Cilandak World Congress came back to the group talking enthusiastically about how Bapak had set Subud the task of establishing an international bank which would help fund enterprises. Enterprises were what Subud should be doing now and the activity of enterprise could also help our spiritual growth.

The idea of enterprise held great personal attraction for me. I had already decided since coming to University that I had no stomach for a rat-race type career and would always want to be an 'independent'. Although incredibly clueless about business and finance, the idea of personal development through enterprise greatly appealed to me. But it was immediately clear that the idea of enterprise did not go down so well with the group. One could see a kind of three way split that I believe, continues in Subud to this day. One set of people thought that Bapak had gone off the rails, and that it was inappropriate for spiritual people to involve themselves with something so low and unclean as business, and that in any case it was a stupid idea because how were they going to be any good at it? Another set were not entirely convinced but went along with the idea because Bapak was saying this is what we should do and therefore it must be right. The third and smallest set of people were those who were 100% enthusiastic. Some of these, like myself, were probably already pre-disposed towards the idea of standing on one's own feet. Maybe some supported the idea because they supported anything Bapak suggested anyway. There were of course also those members who were already successful entrepreneurs, though whether they all supported Bapak's ideas on enterprise is another question.

After having been opened and then completing my college course a year later, I drifted for two years from one Subud group to another supporting myself with a mixture of temporary employment, teaching musical instruments and doing painting and decorating for Subud enterprises. My material circumstances were appalling, but it was an interesting time during which I encountered many early enterprise efforts.

One sees articles in Subud publications that attempt to brand Subud members as somehow intrinsically unsuited to business. This conclusion seems nonsensical to me, and there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. Offhand, from enterprises that started in the '70s in Britain, I can quote these examples:

- a health food shop run by an ex-accountant and his wife, that was so successful that their rivals, part of a big and powerful national chain, had to close down because of the business they lost to the Subud members' venture
- an educational aids business that later grew to be one of Britain's biggest two suppliers of educational software
- a pioneering chain of health-food restaurants in Edinburgh with a large and very popular flagship restaurant on the most expensive shopping street in town

Yes, there were people who were clueless and who got involved in predictable, sometimes comic, disasters, but there were also many enterprises enjoying modest success: dress shops, printers, a food processing factory, electronics and mechanical equipment manufacture and so on. In other words one saw a spectrum of success and failure – Subud members weren't necessarily specially suited to

business, but neither were they specially unsuited. Even members of left-wing political persuasion, to whom business was probably a dirty word, were getting involved. Some in the North of England formed an artists and musicians cooperative. We were told it was 'a new kind of business, not about making money'. Needless to say, it was successful in meeting the latter target, but it did do good things providing work and support for Subud artists.

On top of all this there were the two big international projects, the Bank and the Widjojo building. Members were encouraged to subscribe money in the form of shares, and they were seeing real results – the bank was established, the office block was built as an impressive and innovative piece of modern architecture. One member, a well-known artist whose paintings were featured in Playboy magazine (to the consternation of some members), summed up the mood when he said, 'We live in exciting times.'

So it was perhaps not surprising in the 1980s that members made a special effort to support the Anugraha project and went on making efforts even while costs were increasing to three times the original estimate. I heard that the mistake the first team of directors made was to try to save money by managing the building work themselves. They had no experience in the field, which is why costs spiralled. For those who would be quick to apportion blame for this mistake, believe me I have seen more experienced businessmen than those Subud members make the same mistake in the field of computer software development, in their case sucked in by the hope of making big bucks but having absolutely no idea of the special expertise and experience required to manage a software project successfully.

It has been said that the pain and financial loss caused by the Anugraha project put an end to Subud's enterprise ambition. If that is so, how does one explain the fact that many members were convinced to invest, ten years later, in the Premier Hotels project, including people who had previously lost money in Anugraha?

In my opinion there is another factor, that has not been recognised, that is responsible for the demise of enterprise, and that is that the particular enterprise model that Bapak pressed upon us was unsuitable for Subud, for several reasons:

- 1) It promoted investment in capital-hungry start-up businesses without a proven track-record. This is the kind of thing venture capitalists do, but we do not collectively have the considerable expertise and experience of venture capitalists. We also do not have anything like their available funds. Venture capitalists invest large amounts of money across many different enterprises following a well-known rule-of-thumb that nine out of ten such investments will probably fail but that the one in ten that succeeds will perform well enough to be able to make a profit on the investments overall. Subud members, however, were expected to take the risk of venture capitalism, but without the insurance provided by a spread of investment – all our money was being put into just one project at a time.
- 2) The emphasis was usually on finding the best people we had in Subud to be the directors, yet Subud is very small, and therefore it is highly likely that Subud does not have a wide enough choice of available people to build a successful team for such major undertakings. Of course we could, and sometimes did, hire people from outside Subud, but hiring also requires sufficient experience in the field to be able to judge that the hired people are the best for the job.
- 3) Big enterprise was promoted as being a cooperative venture in which we could all feel involved. In reality, by the '80s, it had become an 'us and them' situation – 'you' hand over the money and trust that 'we' will manage it well'.

- 4) When things go wrong, any co-operative element there is in big enterprise becomes progressively obscured. Typically, rich Subud investors step in to save the ailing project. This creates, later on, an almost impossible to resolve conflict between the need to honour the goodwill of the original many small Subud investors of limited means and the need to similarly recognise the debt to the large investors, who may have stepped in at no small risk to themselves in order to save the business.
- 5) The majority of members' funds are tied up in non-liquid investment. There is no way to easily release funds from badly performing enterprise and place them elsewhere.
- 6) The large sums of money could have been better utilised spread across smaller-scale local projects which might have made a difference to members' lives and built up a community of people who supported and respected each other through their joint involvement in enterprise. Instead funds have been siphoned off into a handful of remote projects that could only offer a promise of some vague future glory for Subud.
- 7) There was an implication that the only kind of business worth getting involved in was very big business: gold mines, large office blocks, banks, because that was the only way we'd make big profits. If it were that easy, wouldn't people everywhere be clubbing together their funds to become sharers in fortunes of millions? Imagine meeting a friend in the street who told you that he had discovered a brilliant model for investment – he was selling all his shares and investing all his money in a gold-mine exploration – you'd think he was rather naïve, would you not?

I was drawn into Subud through wanting a solution for a personal problem. At that time I certainly wasn't seeking for anything like Subud, but I joined nevertheless, because I believed the latihan provided a technique for personal progress on all levels, far superior to anything else that I knew of. My family background could be described as 'totally indifferent to religion', so I brought with me none of the religious upbringing that seems to cause some members such difficulties of resolution with their Subud experience. Everything Bapak taught about the lower forces I found, and still find, to make perfect sense in practise, and to be entirely compatible with my former experiences in Gurdjieff. Additionally I was already, before becoming a member, trying to develop possible lines of self-employment for the future, so I embraced the idea of enterprise enthusiastically. And, despite not being a Muslim, I have also done the Ramadhan fast many times, and have found great benefit from twice-weekly prihatin as advised by Bapak. On the face of it, therefore, I should be a model supporter of Subud. But I am not. The reason why is a subject for a future article.

\*Some readers may be curious to know the title and author of this book. I am very sorry; it is too long ago to remember. I only read it briefly on that one afternoon and have not come across it anywhere since.