

# Subud as University

By David Week

I recently came across some very beautiful photographs posted by Leonard Dixon. You can see them here: <http://picasaweb.google.com/Ldixon7/>. Other than the many familiar faces of people I've known for a long time, what struck me was how evocative they were of an era, how wonderfully cool many people looked, and quite how many cigarettes were being smoked.

It also struck me in looking at these photographs that in many ways the early days of Subud were like high school: people were growing and changing, everything seemed exciting and new, the future seemed endless and hopeful, lifelong friendships were being forged. Just as in high school, people lived as if there were no tomorrow: they threw in their successful businesses and moved to Cilandak; dispensed with accounting and became musicians; travelled around the world following Pak Subuh on tour, as if he were the Beatles or the Grateful Dead.

Above all, Subud was going to *change the world*. Who wasn't, in high school?

And there is much that continues in this vein. Congresses are no longer charged with visions of an imminent future; they're more like high school reunions, where people catch up with old friends. And now we're having our fifty-year reunion. How the years come and go... eh?

But however much we value and look back to high school, we grow up and become adults. We start to connect with reality, or rather—reality starts to connect with us. Suddenly, not all things are possible. We're not the smartest guys in the room. Ambitious plans get bogged down in the minutiae of daily life. Things go wrong. Bad things happen. Life gets complicated.

At this point, it's easy to get discouraged. Things Are Not Working Out As Planned. But there's light here.

First, it's true that things are not working out as planned, but this is good: because who wants to live a life planned by adolescents. And that's what we were in high school.

Second, instead of thinking we're going to *change* the world, we are forced to move on to being *part* of the world: being a productive and beneficial actor in the world, without seeking to control it. We have to deflate our ego, and realise that we may not end up being The Best In The World at anything. And that forces us to question the desire to be The Best, The Greatest, The Salvation, The New, The Original, The Most Important...the Anything with a capital 'A'. We start to find the magic in everyday life.

One of my favourite quotes is this one, from the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hanh:

The Zen master Ling Chi said that the miracle is not to walk on burning charcoal or in the thin air or on the water; the miracle is just to walk on earth. You breathe in. You become aware of the fact that you are alive. You are still alive and you are walking on this beautiful planet. That is already performing a miracle. The greatest of all miracles is to be alive. We have to awaken ourselves to the truth that we are here, alive. We are here making steps on this beautiful planet. This is already performing a miracle.

<<http://www.peaceiseverystep.org/peaceiseverystep/mindfulwalking.html>>

Growing up gives us the opportunity to go past the cheap miracle of the 'amazing experience'. It forces us to start looking at the miracle that is all around us, in every moment. As individuals, many of us have moved beyond adolescent ambition and hubris, to start to find this magic in everyday life. But sometimes our collective behaviour lags behind our individual growth.

Part of the high school experience was to have a favourite teacher. We are fortunate indeed if we can remember one or two teachers who were special to us, who opened our eyes to seeing the world in a particular kind of way. For many in Subud, Pak Subuh was that teacher.

But as adults, we know that although we may have learned much from our favourite teacher, it is nowhere near adequate for a whole and productive life. Our education continues beyond high school—whether we like it or not.

And so we move from one phase of our life as a community—into another.

In Subud, we like to think that our community, our understanding, our practices are unique. We *are* unique, of course, in the way that every leaf is unique, and every flower is unique. But in a broader view, we know that each leaf is similar to a billion others, as is every flower. That makes any one leaf or flower no less beautiful. But it does open the door to another level of appreciation: of the way that all leaves follow a pattern.

The sociologist Max Weber studied the pattern of communities like ours: spiritual communities, religious communities. He saw that they all started in the same way: through a charismatic individual who exercised charismatic leadership. As one scholar puts it:

Charismatic Leadership is defined by Max Weber as 'resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him'. He defines Charisma as 'a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader....'

<[http://www.12manage.com/methods\\_weber\\_charismatic\\_leadership.html](http://www.12manage.com/methods_weber_charismatic_leadership.html)>

Without doubt Pak Subuh was the Charismatic Leader of Subud. At the same time, we might adopt the view of the botanist surveying all leaves and flowers, and realise that we are following a pattern. We are far from alone in having been founded in this way.

According to Weber, Charismatic Leadership is only one of three forms of authority in communities such as ours. The other two forms are traditional domination (patriarchs, patrimonialism, feudalism), and legal domination (modern law and state, bureaucracy). In his view, all forms of authority can be understood in terms of these three basic types: charismatic, traditional, legal.

According to Weber, the Charismatic Leader resists the other forms of authority. We see this when Pak Subuh talks against written, legalistic traditions mere 'outer', or against the occasional tendencies of helpers to bureaucratize themselves into a hierarchy. We also see this in the way that he toyed with the legal structure of Subud,

for instance constantly appointing Varindra as head, over Varindra's objections. During the Charismatic Leader's reign, all is kept in a state of constant flux. It's exciting—if unsettling. But that is the pattern of such leadership.

Weber's analysis of religious and spiritual movements shows that after the death of the Charismatic Leader, movements inevitably 'routinize'. That means that they start shifting into one of the other two forms of authority: traditional, or legal.

This shift is a big one, and the transition from 'charisma to routine' is often mediated by:

...the emergence of a second leader somewhat less charismatic than the first but still charismatic enough to enable the transition and insure its legitimacy.  
<<http://www.cesnur.org/2002/slc/adogame.htm>>

According to Weber, this second leader is chosen by one or more of just four methods:

(1) A search can be conducted for a leader with similar qualities. (2) The succession can be established through supernatural revelation. Weber cites the example of the lineage of Dalai Lamas, where dreams and omens are employed to find the next. (3) The original charismatic leader may specifically designate a successor. (4) The leader's office may be hereditary.  
<<http://www.cesnur.org/2001/london2001/chryssides.htm>>

One can see the shift to traditional authority in the constant emphasis on Pak Subuh's talks, translated and re-translated, published in far greater quantity than works by any other Subud author, or even all other authors put together (very different from the early days of Subud, which were marked by many Western voices and interpretations: Rofé, Bennett, Vittachi, Van Hien, Bright-Paul...). The founder's talks are then used as source material by helpers, in explanations and guidance. This is how traditional authority works. This is how it is constructed, not just in Subud, but in other movements as well.

One can see the shift to legal authority in the increasing organisation of the various levels of committee, and in particular in the codification and trademarking of the Subud name and symbol. Trademarking controls who uses the symbol, and how it used as the imprimatur of Subud. What is authorised. What is not. This is how legal authority works.

In both cases, one finds extensive muttering and complaints among the membership. Against the first, that Subud is becoming like a religion, with its own prophet and dogma; against the second, that Subud is becoming authoritarian and bureaucratic, and imposing heavy rules that would never have come down in Pak Subuh's day.

Both criticisms have merit. However, what we are seeing is the historical patterns which govern the growth of religious movements, whether we like it or not. Our movement is a human community, and there are certain ways we humans like to organise ourselves.

However, in Subud's case (and probably in many other cases as well) this seems rather sad. Subud has always been strongly anti-authoritarian—except for Pak Subuh's charismatic authority, to which it has been strongly subservient. Many members came to Subud attracted by the promises of no dogma, no teacher, not a religion, just direct experience. That is a heady, inspirational promise. Committee work is often described as 'herding cats'—a reference to Subud members' strong independence, and refusal to submit to legal authority. And indeed, if Subud were to

evolve into yet another traditional/legal authoritarian movement, there would be little to distinguish it from other movements. It would become just another minor religion, one among an endless parade.

Is there a way out? Can we 'routinize'—which we are doing, and which Weber says we will do—without succumbing to either patristic authority or legalistic bureaucracy?

I think we can, if we choose the right model. And I think that the model for us is the university.

In terms of our original metaphor of the high school, universities are what follows high school. I can't resist the pun: they are centres of 'higher learning', just as Subud aspires to be. Universities are also centres of research and education that assist people well beyond graduation. They are not just schools. They are assets to the whole of society, and to people of all ages.

Beyond the metaphor, however, universities share a fundamental affinity to Subud. As any university administrator will attest, trying to manage academics is like herding cats!

This is not just a surface affinity. The literary theorist Stanley Fish has pointed out that university academics are the only professionals devoted to anti-professionalism. That is, their job is to undermine, question, doubt, pull down, and pull apart whatever is the accepted dogma held by any profession, whether it be priests, lawyers or even university professors. In universities, you make your name if you overturn a long-cherished belief. Universities are fundamentally anti-dogmatic.

This is because universities are strongly against traditional authority (you shouldn't believe something just because someone older tells you to) and legal authority (you shouldn't believe something because your boss tells you to). The academic ideal is to be independent, and to refer only to reality as the touchstone of truth. Subud too is anti-professional—against the idea of priests, dogma, scriptural authority, legal authority, and in favour (at least in theory) of direct experience as the touchstone of truth.

In the model university, the administration is completely neutral. It holds no views on the nature of reality. It just administers. Of course, sometimes universities fall from this ideal. Recently, for instance, many university administrations have fallen into the thrall of 'economic rationalism'. But when they do fail in this way, people complain that the university is being undermined.

The need for 'impartial administration' is also the reason that 'universities' such as the Osho university, or the Maharishi university, have little credibility as universities. We all know they are dominated by a particular creed.

The original idea of Subud was that it would be open to anyone, and in particular people of any religion. Let's expand 'religion' to the broader 'belief system' or 'worldview'. That could include traditional religions: Islam, Judaism, Kejawen or Jainism. It can also include those that we don't consider religions, but nonetheless constitute broad, life-encompassing worldviews: Confucianism, Taoism, Humanism or Science.

Now visualise Subud as a flower. Around the centre of the flower are the petals: the different worldviews. Any petal can attach itself to the centre. Anyone can come.

The centre has to be clear, empty, open—because worldviews are incompatible: 'things of the heart and mind' in the Kejawen lingo; 'positive theologies', in the

language of the *Via Negativa*. One cannot at the same time believe that children are born pure (Islam) and impure (Kejawen), or that Christ is God (Christianity), and not God (everyone else), or that truth is obtained through scientific enquiry, and through magic.

In Subud as a university, the central power base and administration would have to be clear of all theology and ideology. In a university, the administration can take no partisan view on the relative truths of the various departments. Nor does it take a position on the relative truths of competing views within any department. It is impartial. It is empty. It provides service, not authority.

But because of the particular history of Subud, what's happened is that the centre is not clear. It is filled with a particular set of beliefs. Western minds, hungry for knowledge, imposed upon Pak Subuh the need for explanations of the otherwise formless and 'beyond mind' *latihan kejiwaan*. Pak Subuh obliged, in terms of his Javanese religious upbringing and religious worldview: 'Kejawen'. Those Kejawen explanations were repeated, codified, printed, bound, and infiltrated the body of Subud, as part of the 'routinisation' into traditional and legal authority.

For Subud to fulfill its original, enticing formulation, based as it is on direct exploration of reality, sans dogma, the centre must be cleared. Then, every worldview—religious or otherwise—can approach and attach itself to the centre, without being contradicted by a Kejawen belief system at the heart.

Subud is not high school. We're adults now. In attaining adulthood, it's okay to look back nostalgically to the high school experience that brought us here. It's not helpful to dwell in that nostalgia. Even adults need an institute of learning. The model that suits Subud is the university, because universities aim to be free of traditional and legal authority, even as, deep down, Subud claims to be.

In the model of the university, different departments take different approaches to understanding the world, but the administration is starkly neutral on all matters of knowledge or belief. In Subud-as-university, people of any religion or belief can come, because the centre is similarly empty on matters of knowledge or belief. In order to achieve that state, we have to empty out the centre. We have to move to a petal what has come to occupy the centre.