

Subud without Theology

By David Week

At the 2008 Subud Australia Adelaide Congress, Salamah Pope told me that she and Emmanuel Williams had tried to write a description of 'Subud for Atheists', but that they'd never managed to get past the first paragraph.

This project intrigued me. I think it's an important one, and not just for atheists. Here's why:

When I look at the world in which I travel, there is a lot of scope for a description of Subud that doesn't depend on the G-word. Take, for instance, one place I work: Laos. Laos is both Communist and Buddhist. Communism is atheistic. Buddhism allows for God or gods, but considers them all 'unnecessary'. Another place I work is in Aceh, the verandah of Mecca. If you float around touting some of Subud's theistic literature there, you're likely to end up before a sharia court, or maybe just beaten with sticks by a mob. You see, people that take the G-word seriously can be very, very particular about how you use it. Sharif Horthy tells of going to Saudi Arabia, and being given 'a rough time' when he attempted to describe Subud.[1] I'm reminded of Mark Twain's observation that:

Man is the religious animal. He is the only religious animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself and cuts his throat, if his theology isn't straight.

If you look at the world map of religions, you have your Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) which all tend to be pretty picky about what you say about G-d. Then there is Hinduism, which has many gods – I have a Hindu friend does morning *puja* to Ganesh every morning. Buddhism, as I noted, doesn't see the issue of God or gods as central to human life. The Chinese traditions like Taoism and Confucianism don't have much truck with deities. The world's many indigenous and tribal religions have spirits or ancestral figures particular to the local culture. That makes for a lot of ways in which you can run aground if you start making claims about G-d in the way you describe Subud. And we haven't even got to secular humanists, post-modernists, or good old-fashioned atheists and agnostics yet!

An account of Subud without any reference to theology would have the advantage not only of being good for atheists, and those cultures where G-d is not a big thing, but also of being free of those hot buttons that trigger reactions from cultures where G-d *is* a big thing. A description without theology could work not only for atheists, but just about for anyone. Like this:

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An imagined conversation between Jon – an interested person – and David, a Subud helper.

Jon is an apatheist. Apatheism is defined as: 'a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's.[2]

David is a pragmatist, and thus willing to be very flexible in his thinking and his words. He thinks of 'true' not as the repetition of some orthodox form, but uses whatever forms of thought and words produce a good result.

Jon: So, what's this Subud thing, then?

David: Well, it's a community of people who practice this exercise called the 'latihan', an Indonesian word meaning 'exercise'. Pretty tricky, huh – an exercise called 'exercise'?

Jon: Very cute. But not very revealing. Describe this exercise. And why use an Indonesian word?

David: The Indonesian vocab is an artefact of Subud's history. Don't worry about it.

What is the exercise? Let me start with the idea of meditation. We might define meditation as something like this: a period of time when you stop focusing on external stimuli; also a time when you stop trying to think about or achieve your various goals, but rather 'let go'.

Jon: Okay.

David: Now, our popular image of meditation is basically that of a Buddhist monk, sitting in lotus position, eyes half closed. However, there are really a huge variety of different meditations out there in the world. In addition to meditations that are still and silent, like the Buddhist 'sitting', there are moving meditations. For instance, there is walking meditation. There is also Tai Chi, which you may have seen, because people often practice it in parks.

To go further, we have moving meditations that are structured – in which people follow a set pattern of movements – and spontaneous moving meditations, in which there is no set pattern. For instance, there is an exercise called spontaneous *qigong*, which has many similarities to the latihan. There's also a spontaneous moving meditation in Zen Buddhism; and one in yoga called '*shaktipat*'. And in these spontaneous moving meditations, the way people experience them, it feels as if there's a force moving them, or as if they move themselves, without conscious will, but at the same time they can stop at any time. Not controlled, but not out of control either.

This is of course a subjective impression. If you stand in a doorway, hang your arms down, and then press them out against the door-frame for about thirty seconds – and then step away – you'll feel them rise 'spontaneously'. It feels like an external force. So in some of these traditions, this sense of being moved by a force gets reified as a real force: in *qigong*, it's '*qi*', and in the tradition behind the latihan, it's 'life force' – which means basically the same thing. But we can see that as just a way of people describing an experience, and we don't need to attach too much importance to the description.

Jon: Okay – spontaneous moving meditation. Not controlled, but not out of control either. Sounds interesting, but I have to tell you, I'm not into meditation or yoga or Buddhism. So why would one want to do this? Are there supposed to be some benefits?

David: Well, depends on who you talk to, but my answer is 'not really'. I've hung around Subud people most of my life, and they seem as varied in their goods and bads and ups and downs as anyone else, so I can't see that there's any systematic benefit to it, in the sense of reliably making people better or happier or anything like that. But let me give you a different angle on this.

What the child development people tell us is that – unless you're born disadvantaged in some way or another – every child is born with a full range of human faculties. One

image, from Jung, is that of a sun that radiates equally in all directions. But society needs to condition you to play a role. So you get conditioned to shut down parts of yourself. One aspect that typically gets shut down in our culture is your body, and so we end up living 'in our heads', all 'above the neck', but relatively underdeveloped in our feelings, in our bodies. This is known as the privileging of mind over body, of thinking over feeling, of vision over touch.

In latihan, you experience the opposite of that, precisely because it is a bodily practice, rather than a thought practice. So there's the potential there to awaken or explore the parts of yourself that are shut down when your body gets shut down.

One of the Indonesian explanations for how this exercise works is that it's supposed to develop your '*rasa*', which is a kind of sensory organ for 'feeling' or intuition, that they see as located in your chest. Now I don't buy the Indonesian physiology, but I do think there's something to the idea that our bodies play an important role in the way that we perceive and make decisions. And there's a lot of contemporary literature to support that notion.

For instance, there's a best-selling book around called *Descartes' Error* by António Damásio, a professor of neuroscience at USC. Damásio shows that 'feeling' plays an essential role in all human decision-making.[3] He says there's a part of the brain that constitutes a map of the human body. And if that part is destroyed by accident or disease, a person loses the ability to make any kind of decision. He shows that the cerebral cortex is very good at dreaming up options, but that when it comes to choosing between options, we all engage our feelings. The latihan was sometimes described by Subuh, the founder of Subud, as 'a training for the feelings'.

Jon: So – just as I might take time to exercise my body because I spend too much time on a chair in front of my laptop, you're suggesting that this exercise might be good for my capacity to feel, because I spend too much time in my head.

David: Nice analogy. So that's part of the story. The other thing that I mentioned is 'letting go', which in Subud is usually called 'surrender – in my view a very poor term in English, but one that's a product of Subud's history.[4]

Since early childhood, we're raised to set and pursue goals. In his book *Living without a Goal*,[5] James Ogilvy suggests that every time we set up a goal, we subordinate our lives to something else. He suggests that though it's all right to set small goals (do your tax return, buy the groceries, do the laundry, get a new job), setting large goals unduly constrains life, by subordinating it to that goal.

In an exercise of 'letting go' like the latihan, we practice letting go of our goal-centred daily lives: not just formally constituted goals, but the whole habitual activity we engage in of anticipating and desiring a particular future, a particular imagined world. The latihan is also an exercise of our suppressed capacity to live in the moment, day by day, adaptively, creatively, without too much projection of the present into the future.

Our culture leads us to suppress our ability to live out of the whole of our body, and conditions us to favour our heads. It also suppresses our ability to live day by day, and conditions us to lead instead lives that are subordinate to goals: business goals, career goals, financial goals, personal development goals, ideals, imagined states of contentment, 'if only'.... Just as physical exercise can restore function to muscles atrophied by deskwork, the *latihan* can exercise broader human capacities that have been atrophied by the way our lives have been socially conditioned.

Jon: Okay – so, like physical exercise, this latihan is an exercise of faculties and

capacities that are important, but tend to be suppressed or ignored in our culture today: like the capacity to feel, and the capacity to live adaptively, creatively and spontaneously.

David: That's my view.

Jon: Anything else?

David: Well, one more thing, and it's got nothing to do with the exercise itself, but with the Subud community.

Jon: Yes. I was going to ask you about what the people were like.

David: Like any other community you might have encountered – though generally pretty middle class. In Indonesia, it's overwhelmingly Javanese; in the US, Europe and Australia, it's overwhelmingly white. In other words it's fairly typical of the class of people that go for this kind of exercise, be it yoga, meditation or *latihan*. Generally nice people, though they may have some rather grandiose ideas about the impact they imagine their community has on the world.

But the Subud community provides a different kind of community than you might find in other parts of your life. In your work community, you tend to deal with other people who are from the same professional or educational background as yourself. In your friendship circles, you get to choose your friends, and most of us choose like-minded and like-background people. Your family is of course your family.

In modern life, we tend not to belong to a 'community' in the sense of a village – a group of people whom we don't choose, a more random cross-section of society. But in the Subud community, you get thrown together into community with people that are not like you, and whom you do not choose. There's a greater range of difference in terms of social background and – more importantly – belief.

The downside of those differences is that they can raise stress levels when you try to do or decide something together. The upside is that dealing with such differences – learning how to do that, how to handle the anxiety, and find the best way through – is part of learning to be an adult, of growing up. The mechanism is well described in the book *Passionate Marriage* by David Schnarch.[6]

Jon: Wait a minute. I thought that was a book about sex!

David: It is. But it's also a book about how being linked to people who are fundamentally different from you triggers anxiety; how anxiety can tip you over into acting from your 'reptilian' brain – in other words, pretty badly – and how dealing with that over time constitutes a 'people-growing machine'. The Subud community is a 'people-growing machine'. And like marriage, it's not always easy.

Jon: On that point, I'm not sure you've done a very good sales job.

David: I'm trying to give you the straight pitch, rather than a propaganda spiel. It has some benefits; it has some pain-in-the-butt negatives. It has nothing that you can't find elsewhere, in other ways. But it does suit some people. It doesn't suit all people.

Jon: So, to summarise what you've told me: the latihan, and the Subud community, constitute an opportunity to work on some aspects of myself that might be underdeveloped because of the way we are raised and lived. Like a physical gym, it might not always be easy, or pleasant – but it delivers some benefits in terms of a more rounded life.

And the particular bits that get developed in this particular gym are:

- how to develop your feelings as well as your head
- how to live unsubordinated to goals: more creatively and freely
- how to interact positively with a community of people you didn't choose, who may hold views and beliefs that are very different from yours.

David: That's not the official view, but those are some of the jigsaw pieces that I've found, that help me make sense of it in the modern world, without adopting a whole bunch of Javanese explanations.

Jon: Sounds like you're not sure it's for you.

David: No, I'm not sure. But I continue to go with the flow. It's part of that exercise in openness and goallessness.

Jon: Beer?

David: Definitely.

End notes

1. Sharif Horthy, 'Subud Meets Religion', World Conference on Religions and Peace, Amman, Jordan, November 1999.
<<http://www.raymondo.demon.co.uk/subud/sharjord.htm>>
2. Jonathan Rauch, 'Let It Be', *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003.
http://www.jonathanrauch.com/jrauch_articles/apatheism_beyond_religion/index.html
>
3. Damásio's 1994 book, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, was nominated for the Los Angeles Times Book Award and is translated in over 30 languages. His second book, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, was named as one of the ten best books of 2001 by New York Times Book Review, a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year, a Library Journal Best Book of the Year, and has thirty foreign editions. Damásio's most recent book, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, was published in 2003. In it, Damásio explores philosophy and its relations to neurobiology, suggesting that it might provide guidelines for human ethics.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/António_Damásio>
4. Here, according to the Oxford American dictionary, is the meaning of the word 'surrender' in English:

cease resistance to an enemy or opponent and submit to their authority: over 140 rebels surrendered to the authorities.

give up or hand over (a person, right, or possession), typically on compulsion or demand: in 1815 Denmark surrendered Norway to Sweden | they refused to surrender their weapons.

(in a sports contest) lose (a point, game, or advantage): she surrendered only twenty games in her five qualifying matches.

(surrender to) abandon oneself entirely to (a powerful emotion or influence);

*give in to: he was surprised that Miriam should surrender to this sort of jealousy
| he surrendered himself to the mood of the hills.*

*(of an insured person) cancel (a life insurance policy) and receive back a
proportion of the premiums paid.*

So the connotations are to 'cease resistance to an enemy', 'give up on compulsion or demand', 'lose', 'abandon oneself', and 'cancel' – hardly a very positive word.

5. James Ogilvy, *Living Without a Goal: Finding the Freedom to Live a Creative and Innovative Life*, Currency Books, 1995

<<http://www.yourheroicjourney.com/LiveWithoutGoals-Review.htm>>

6. David Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage*, Scribe, 1999