

The following article is an edited selection from 'edtalk', a facility set up to permit private conversations among the Subud Vision editors. Over the past two years many articles have been sparked by our discussions. In this case we are offering part of one discussion thread as an article in itself, hoping that you will enjoy the diversity and complexity that six different minds bring to a basic Subud Vision theme. The title was added later; we did not set out with any particular topic in mind. And there is no set ending; the conversations continue.

Change vs. Authority

A Subud Vision Discussion

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HP: For a long time many of us have felt disappointed that Subud wasn't living up to our collective hopes and expectations. A common response was that we just needed to do more, to do it better, to somehow be better. If things went really wrong, we tended to blame it on individuals who were screwing up. It's taken me a long time to realize that the problems go deeper than this — that how Bapak set some things up just doesn't work today. Now we're thinking that things could be improved; we're ready to re-evaluate. I don't think we could've done it before. Well, in fact only a minority are ready now. A lot of people are still stuck in the old groove of 'do more, do it better, be better'. That's still the conservative answer. That's what happens if you essentially turn his advice into your religion and view it as infallible. Any failed outcome must be due to your own weakness.

SD: The situation is complicated by the fact that the 'have faith in Bapak' people are inconsistent. For example, there's a member who wants me to run all my proposed changes for Subud past Ibu Rahayu to get her approval, but at the same time he is not interested in reviving the enterprise concept because he 'knows Bapak was wrong about that'. Seems to be a case of 'seek outside authority for the things one is scared of changing, but don't worry if we abandon the rest of Bapak's advice that we never particularly went for anyway'. So what we get is a competing set of personally tailored Subud creeds, all claiming Bapak's absolute authority, with the most forceful personalities getting away with it because we don't have any proper discussion of the issues in Subud, only the implied childish claim: 'I have received a greater understanding of Bapak than anyone else has.'

RP: A fellow helper once said to me: if you start disagreeing with Bapak, where do you draw the line? The implication being that you have to accept it all. But I think you are perfectly right, Sahlan, that we all have our personal Subud creeds, which involve a selection of Bapak explanations that resonate with us, plus what we've acquired from our own life experience. In practice there is no shared Subud creed; in practice we all believe what makes sense to us and reject the rest. So the Subud belief system is an illusion. And the pretence that there is one creates a lot of friction.

SD: Rosalind, I don't think it's quite that. In addition to our inevitable personal creeds, I believe it is possible to identify certain spiritual concepts that are popular with members, and these form a sort of loose, unofficial creed for Subud. My Subud-think article set out to identify and expose some of those ideas. You talk about friction, but I think the ideas

that are most damaging are the ones that bond rather than divide. There's a very good example in the Subud Vision article 'Subud: the Tribe'. The author describes an incident where a helper intimidates a newer member who is the only one in a testing session with the courage to say that she can't feel 'a personal connection to Bapak'. Through peer pressure, through not wanting to appear 'spiritually insensitive', through deferring to the supposed greater wisdom and experience of long-term members, certain popular spiritual notions are perpetuated, but these notions are not necessarily valid, and more importantly, they often have nothing to do with Subud as such, but are just a rehash, seen through a Subud lens, of old corny notions about what constitutes 'spiritual' behaviour.

RP: I think the shared beliefs and the clashing beliefs can both be a problem, in different ways. I remember people arguing in past years about differing interpretations of Bapak's advice. When you have an authority, it becomes important to act in accordance with that authority, and everyone is eager to appear to be lining up on the right side. When the authority is inconsistent, as Bapak sometimes was, you have fertile ground for squabbles over relatively trivial matters. And this can poison the atmosphere and set people against each other.

SD: Let's play a game of statistics, guessing some figures: 50% of members want change; 50% of members want to do everything exactly as (they claim) Bapak said we should; 2% of members are strongly supportive of Bapak's exhortations about enterprise. Now take anything that Bapak talked about — gays, Buddhism, status of women, the Subud organisation, applicants etc. etc. References to such matters are scattered, not found in every talk. You need to be selective to find them, and sometimes there are contradictions. However, almost every talk from the 1970s onwards has a large section devoted to the subject of enterprise. Therefore one has to conclude that, if my guessed figures are right, only 2% are truly trying to follow what Bapak wanted, the other 48% are taking a pick-and-mix approach of what they think is important and using Bapak's borrowed authority to back up their opinions and prejudices. It's not relevant to my argument whether Bapak was right or wrong about enterprise or whether one agrees with him or not; my point is that the 'following Bapak' idea is just a pretence, and doesn't correspond to the reality.

MB: Sahlan, that's a neat way of coming at it. This sums up what I have been trying to get at in articles for some time... most 'talk the talk', but sure as hell don't 'walk the walk' as they say. The so-called *Helper's Handbook* is the main culprit because it's full of stuff skimmed off, concentrated down and served up in one 'easy-read' package. Even then, members pik'n'mix from it, creating their own flexi-belief systems (there's always a Bapak quote to back you up, even if it differs from what you quoted last week).

SD: Another way the quoting Bapak tactic is used is to save worry or effort. Suppose somebody is campaigning for a major organisational change, and the organisation is not an interest of yours, nor something you wish to spend time on. It's so convenient to be able to say, 'Well, Bapak set it up; we should just follow his guidance.' You can wash your hands of the affair and satisfy your conscience in one easy step.

SF: Both points, about the 'pick-and-mix' use of Bapak's talks to serve personal beliefs, and the cop-out point, are valuable insights. At the same time I doubt that logical argument will persuade. It's more, I believe, to do with a fear of opening the Pandora's box of change than with having an arguable position. My own approach is to try to let go of frustration and annoyance in order to feel some empathy with those people and then to continue to bring issues out into the open, as I see no other way forward for us as an

organisation.

SD: Stefan, if this were just about fear of change then the two sides could have a straightforward discussion about a list of proposed changes and try to come to some agreement about which changes would be advisable. At the very least, one would expect a willingness to engage in short-term experiments with a subsequent evaluation of results. However, I think you would agree that this is not a straightforward discussion but one that is motivated by feelings of a religious nature, the belief that there is something central and sacred which must be guarded against any change. But it's clear that what has developed in Subud is not about following God's will, as might be claimed, but the very much more mundane and predictable process of a priesthood being selective about which parts of the prophet's advice to emphasise. The priesthood in Subud is not formally constituted but is more of a loose alliance of helpers and 'dedicated' members. What should really be questioned is not Bapak's authority but the assumed authority of those people to interpret Bapak for us. Often — and this is another way in which the development of Subud follows a predictable pattern — you encounter people who lack the insight to understand the essence, who latch onto the form instead and turn it into a rigid rule.

HP: Here's an important change I'd like to see happen in our Subud culture: whenever we're talking with someone else, we should expect that the other person will treat whatever we say as though it is only our own opinion, regardless of whether we are quoting Bapak, reporting testing, sharing a revelation or guidance, or just saying what we believe to be true. In other words, we may give special weight to our own testing, or what we pick and choose from Bapak, or even some grand insight we have, but no one else has to grant any authority to it. They are free to either feel the truth in it, or disregard it as not being relevant to them. This seems like the socially mature approach to exchanging ideas, but too often this is not the case in Subud. If we all adopted it, people could still quote Bapak, but not with the expectation of adding authority to what they say; the intention would be different, e.g. perhaps they thought the quote was interesting or informative. People could still share the guidance they've received, but without the expectation that anyone else should be guided by it. People would still think their own opinions are best, but they would be more aware that they have to explain and argue for them in a more normal way, etc.

MN: This is problematic because there are still the subtle but subliminally powerful effects of charisma and peer pressure — which discourage questioning in an impressionable listener — as well as a genuine sense of duty and superior perspective — which encourages those of conviction to not mince their words. Especially in relation to 'spiritual' matters there are heaps of cultural, social and psychological issues at play — both on the part of people who are seeking guidance or a communal haven, and on the part of those who believe they've located something that is objectively beneficial. It's surprising how many influences work against a purely rational understanding — there's even the basic need to be recognised or respected by one's companions. While 'self-regulation' is a lovely concept, I think it can't succeed in the face of countervailing interpersonal dynamics. I'd say Subud needs some sort of explicit ruling or reminder mechanism in this regard.

HP: It's time Subud members face up to the fact that many of the claims we frequently make, e.g. 'compatible with all religions', are true only when applied to the latihan. If we turn Subud into the latihan plus Bapak's explanations about it, then most of our claims are not true. Certainly Bapak said something or other to offend fundamentalists in just about every religion. This strikes me as The Great Hypocrisy in Subud. As I've said

before, we must return to being an organization focused on the latihan and be neutral towards Bapak's talks. Individuals can believe whatever they like. If we're not going to do that, then we need to stop lying about who we are and make some dramatic changes to the claims we make on our websites, among other things.

RP: It's not Bapak's teachings that are the problem so much as the status and authority accorded them. Obviously many Subud members still believe that he had a direct line to God and hence to the Truth. I thought it was very interesting a few years ago when Subud Voice printed some excerpts from the Talks relating to Anwar and Anwas; several members wrote in to object that Buddhism was being inaccurately and unfairly represented by Bapak. The editor referred their comments to Ibu Rahayu, who said in her letter of response that it was not surprising if Bapak got some things wrong about Buddhism, because he was a Muslim after all. It's too bad that the membership in general doesn't see Bapak that way, as a human being subject to normal limitations. To even suggest such a thing is often construed as 'attacking' Bapak, as if people do not have the right to examine a claim to be essentially superhuman.

HP: If someone reads the talks and turns them into a belief system with a lot of rules to follow and says they have faith in the rightness of that, then, to me, that's a religion. It's something that comes from the outside. I would rather put my faith in following my own inner self, based on my own guidance. I may read Bapak's advice, but in the end I have to follow what comes from within. I go along with the idea that we each have to find our own way and that may be different from someone else's way. When we each discover our own individuality and live our lives from that deeper place, then we quickly see that we are not all the same, and consequently we have to go about things differently. For this reason we have to give each other a lot of freedom, including the freedom to believe what we want about Subud, the latihan and Bapak. So, to me it's the difference between putting one's faith in some belief system, in this case one that's based on Bapak's talks, and putting one's faith in the process of living a guided life from one's deeper self. Those are the two sides we're dealing with.

SF: Helissa, I see your point about faith in an inner-directed life. But even in very practical terms some members want freedom to be flexible and to experiment locally, fearing organisational fossilisation if we keep to the tried, tested yet failing formats such as the three month applicant period. Others have faith in the current structure, fearing a dissipation or dilution if we get too free and easy. If group A is the accelerator and group B is the brake we could potentially work in tandem instead of pulling apart. The issue I think is how fast we can become a learning organisation rather than one which responds to change by digging in its heels and perhaps becoming extinct.

HP: A few years ago I looked up 'teachings' in a half dozen dictionaries and had to admit that according to all their definitions Bapak's talks were 'teachings'. There was no way around it, no matter how much Subud members try to rationalize it. Our denial about this is becoming ridiculous! Let's admit that they are 'teachings', but then let's go on to discuss how we should respond to these teachings. As Rosalind says, the problems begin when we give the teachings authority, i.e. power over us. We mustn't allow some belief we've got from the talks to interfere with our receiving clear guidance from our inner selves. Our responses to the talks are different. The idea that there is some common belief system to be taken from the talks is an illusion, as far as I'm concerned. Yes, I know there are members who think there is a common belief system and who think they know what it consists of, but I think they're fooling themselves. Bapak had his own concepts of what Subud is all about, but even if we accept his ideas we don't 'hear' them in the same way. I think people will eventually figure this out when enough of us

start speaking up and saying what we really think. At least, that's what is happening in my group.

SF: The whole point is to create space for people to express diverse views. Over time we will show ourselves to be an organization which supports individuation and autonomy rather than one which promotes conformity. An individual's views may include complete (or partial) agreement with Bapak's explanations about Subud. This only becomes a problem when it results in pressure — overt or subtle — to conform. Interestingly, the recent critics are accusing WSC of the same pressure. They want the freedom to use the language they are used to, etc. I see their point and hope that this dispute will, at the very least, lead to some honest conflict, which I prefer to the brittle veneer of 'harmony', where all controversy is suppressed.

HP: I'd like to see us remove all talks by Bapak from our websites. Having them there makes us look like a cult or religion with Bapak as our guru. It's a matter of giving too much weight to Bapak and not taking enough responsibility for Subud ourselves. Why are we still having Bapak speak for us? Having so much Bapak right there on the website implies that he does have a lot of status and authority in Subud, so you're already pointing newcomers in that direction. Why do we need to explain the latihan so much anyway? The website claims that Subud is not a teaching, but the whole format approaches it as though it is. I don't look at the sites and get excited that this is all about some dynamic experience that could change my life. I think the site needs a serious redo, preferably by someone under the age of thirty-five, or at least by someone with a fresh vision.

SD: I think there is an other issue here which has nothing to do with the status accorded to Bapak and his advice. The issue is a misunderstanding about the nature of the spiritual. We feel we should set ourselves apart by virtue of being 'spiritual'. This leads to the pride that tells us we don't need to accept good advice and techniques from other quarters, that we are 'above all that'. It also makes us believe in fantasy situations and deny the reality of what is going on.

SF: There was a woman (not in Subud) who used to come to our dance events and whom many people found challenging. She was a devout Catholic and did only what her inner guidance (God) told her, which often seemed disrespectful and insensitive towards others. Her spiritual focus seemed to support and justify her. She was the central character in her own fantasy, and people found her both infuriating and pitiable. From what you say, Sahlan (and it matches my observation) our Subud belief system can be self-referential in a similar way. For those who don't have work or friendships which provide reality checks, I suspect the tendency is exaggerated: e.g. in certain retired people whose main occupation is their Subud life. Such people also have, perhaps, the most to lose by relinquishing the 'chosen people' fantasy. They're likely to think that it's you and I who have the problem — a questioning which shows an insufficient ability to trust or to surrender to God.

RP: Some aspects of the Subud fantasy, looked at objectively, are simply not convincing. Many Subud members have followed the latihan for their whole lives without having achieved the results they hoped for. That surely indicates that the expectations were unrealistic. Either that, or the Subud population ranks below-average in terms of spiritual potential, which none of us believe. If God sent the latihan to save mankind and chose Bapak to be in charge of the mission, why wasn't the mission designed in such a way that it would work with ordinary people like us? Once we reject the grandiose expectations and claims, we can examine the potential of the latihan in a more realistic

light. That's our best hope for sharing its benefits with the rest of humanity.