

# God's Work

By Erica Sosna

'God's work isn't done by God, it's done by people.' – Ani Di Franco

Let me introduce myself. My name is Erica Sosna, I am twenty-nine and I joined Subud last year. I have always been a spiritual seeker and have, from an early age, taken an interest in a wide variety of spiritual practices. I have read widely in the areas of religion, spirituality, psychology and faith. I have been on Buddhist retreats, practiced yoga since childhood and am a student of the Course In Miracles.

At the beginning of this year, I set myself a goal, which was to find my spiritual community. By this I meant a community of people who shared the same practice but had no dogma, rules or man-made impositions placed on the practice. I did not realise until I attended Congress for the first time, that perhaps I had found it.

There are a few issues that I would like to discuss here, as much for myself and my own understanding as for the furthering of Subud Vision. I am going to answer the following questions as if I were addressing someone not in Subud.

## **Namely:**

What exactly is Subud?

What is the latihan?

What would I describe as 'Subud culture'?

What is the relationship between Bapak and Subud?

What is opening? What does it mean and what about the applicant period?

What is it about Subud that I would like to share with the world and how might I do it?

Before I begin answering these questions, I'd like to mention a few things that may be of interest.

There is a sect of Buddhism known as Soka Gakkai. Soka Gakkai follow the teaching of the Buddha as set out in the Lotus Sutra. Within this teaching is a belief that all people have an innate Buddha nature and are therefore capable of attaining enlightenment in their current form and present lifetime. The organisation was started by a man called Nichiren Diashonin in the 1200s. The movement is now a worldwide organisation, proclaiming that they offer the 'only true Buddhist practice'.

Nichiren Buddhists practice by chanting 'Namu Myo Ho Renge Kyo', which roughly translates as 'Hail to the Lotus Sutra', and are encouraged to chant for the manifestation of material, emotional and spiritual ends. Groups meet informally at people's homes or at Nichiren Centres around the world.

Much like Subud members, the Nichirens feel that their practice enhances their lives in a deep way. They feel this is the only practice they need to become wise, whole and happy. They feel a great gift has been bestowed upon them by the originator of their practice. And they are also dogged by internal politics and debate with regard to the

power and running of the organisation of Soka Gakkai, the rules and regulations imposed by individual members of the organisation and a discussion of whether the veneration of Soka Gakkai and Nichiren is appropriate. They have had members leave the organisation because of their disenchantment with the way the organisation is run, despite their affinity with the spiritual practice. Many of these ex-members continue to chant.

### **What exactly is Subud?**

To my understanding, Subud is a network or group of people who share a particular practice which they call the latihan. They may come from a variety of backgrounds, ages and faiths to engage in this practice. They are 'members' in so far as they share the common entry or passport, known as 'opening'. Subud members may or may not practise on a regular basis. They may have other faith practices or they may have none at all. Some people are new members and some are old.

### **What is the Latihan?**

The latihan is the spiritual practice of Subud. It is the one unifying element joining all members of Subud, past, present and future.

The latihan or exercise takes place with men and women gathering separately. After a period of closed-eye quietening, the group stands, still with their eyes closed. Someone says 'begin'. After half an hour, someone says 'end'. That's it.

During this time, anything can happen. Members of Subud may describe it as 'receiving the Holy Spirit'. In this sense it is a little like the evangelical church or the Sufi mystics or the fits and journeying described in Shamanism. People who are familiar with Five Rhythms Dancing or Improvisation Comedy might describe it as going with the moment. Certainly, the experience is cathartic and liberating, if one observes it just as a free expression.

For me, the latihan provides an opportunity to differentiate between the observer/witness part of myself and the personality and ego. So, I might find myself crying, but be observing those tears from an emotionally neutral or observational point of view. Other times I have felt as though a force or energy has taken control of my movements and I am acting from a place beyond words. Other times I may sing in a voice that seems more powerful than my own and has knowledge of melodies that I have never heard.

No interpretation is given to this practice except that put on it by the individual experiencing it. The exception to this is testing. This is where a group of people ask to receive a response in relation to a question or query through the use of the latihan and then feedback their findings to the questioner. To me, this is about fine tuning the intuitive voice inside, to know that we always have access to guidance, if we take the time to ask and be still.

Perhaps because this practice is new to me, I am still feeling my way in interpreting my 'receiving'. Thus, I would not feel it appropriate to be asked to make a suggestion about how another person should act or choose, as a result of my receiving on their behalf. I would certainly not allow the receiving of other people to make up my mind in relation to

any issue of importance in my life. This would be a way of avoiding taking responsibility for my choices and for what I intuitively feel is appropriate for me. And that is something that no-one knows better than I do.

### **What is Subud Culture?**

Given that there is such a variety of backgrounds, experiences and individuals, is it possible to discern a particular culture within Subud? For me, the diversity is very enriching – I love that I can feel connected to such a wide variety of people, places and perspectives by virtue of sharing the latihan/practice with others.

Here are a few things I observed at Congress.

After a few days, there was a real sense of the dissolving of boundaries. I felt a sense of shared respect and openness and closeness with people in the Congress. They felt like a really healthy and close family. Even between men and women there was above all a feeling of togetherness, without the sexual tension that can often be present. I also felt a real appreciation and tolerance of different points of view.

I also observed that there is a slight social superiority among some with regard to being from a 'Subud Family' and with regard to the role of helper. Both of these titles seem, to some of their owners, to endow them with an awareness and authority beyond other Subud members. This seems strange to me as the only enduring part of Subud practice is the latihan and, as it is a personal relationship with God, who is to say that one person's practice is stronger or more evolved than another's?

Certainly, it is useful to have long standing members who carry the organisational history. But is Subud like the royal family, to be passed on through blood right and lineage, or is it an organisation that welcomes everyone and wants others to share the good fortune of the discovery of the latihan practice?

Also, there seems to be an idea that you just do the latihan and then you will be sorted. May I remind us all that God's work isn't done by God, it's done by people? If we sincerely strive for our evolution and for the 'receiving' that is God's presence and action in our lives, don't we continually need to be asking ourselves: How would God see this person or this situation? What compassion, wisdom or understanding could He bring to this situation that I cannot see? What is the action I can take for the highest good? Isn't this latihan in action? If not, we risk limiting our spirituality to the waving of hands and emitting of sounds in a room, for half an hour, twice a week. To me, the latihan is something to be lived, a way of being, in surrender to the service of God – taking action on his behalf.

### **What is the relationship between Bapak and Subud?**

Okay, this comes with a health warning for all Bapakists and those seeking a leader: you might not like this.

I have a regular yoga practice. The kind of yoga I do is called Bikram Yoga and the series of postures was designed by a guy called Bikram Choudary. The postures already existed, in the ancient yoga sutras, but it was Bikram, with a bit of help from a Japanese

doctor, who put them together in the 26 posture series now known as Bikram Yoga. It was also Bikram who decided that his yoga should be practiced in a hot room.

I am very grateful for my practice. It leaves me invigorated, stretched, strong, positive and focussed. It has healed long standing injuries and ailments, it has reduced my weight and I have been a devotee for four years now. But who made that happen? Bikram gave me the practice; I put it into practice. Credit where credit is due.

I have a great deal of gratitude to Bikram for putting the series together and training the teachers who teach me. I am also grateful to the person who introduced me to this yoga. By all accounts, Bikram is a bit of an eccentric character, some would say a megalomaniac and some would say of larger than average ego. This does not detract from my appreciation of his work. It does demonstrate that he is only human.

I never had the opportunity to meet Bapak. When I watch him on film and listen to his words, he seems a good person and he certainly likes to talk. But I do not receive any of the deep healing described by others when watching him speak. The talks I have so far been exposed to contain ideas I have already heard in other contexts.

When I put myself in his place, I think of an Indonesian gentleman who had an extraordinary experience and shared it with others. He must have been delighted to have people ask him for his recommendations and opinions on their names, their culture, what to eat, how to live. And he gave some great advice and some less good. What would you do? If suddenly, lots of foreigners were asking me, 'Erica, what shall I eat?' I might reply... 'Errrrr, chicken??'

I hear a lot of 'Bapa says'. And Bapak himself complained about the asking of mundane questions, saying, 'People should really become more self-reliant.' (Stairway to Subud)

Great, you've read the book and got the t-shirt, now what do you say? I guess this comes down to a matter of personality. Some people like to be led and instructed and others do not. To me, Subud and its originator provide another rich seam for my life, as does my Bikram Yoga practice. But the yoga postures existed before Bikram, and latihan existed before Bapak. And Bapak didn't know everything. Nor do I believe that everything he said was directly channelled from God.

And, what's more, it is crucial for me to belong to an organisation where I do not need to hide this view or be hypocritical and pretend that I don't have it.

So hurrah for free speech. This to me is truly an asset of Subud. If we can allow ourselves to openly disagree and continue to respect one another, there is no problem. Where there may be a problem is when new members or outsiders perceive a deep division which threatens the integrity of the organisation. Division makes us appear less accessible or appealing to new entrants. Plus, the lack of consistency of approach or explanation suggests that 'our house is not in order'. We may not need to go so far as developing a 'party line' but I think it would be useful to find a way to explain Subud that is generic enough not to alienate others or be unduly slanted in favour of a personal interpretation.

**What is opening? What does it mean and how does it relate to the applicant**

## **period?**

Can we get clear here – is there a fixed applicant period or not? At Congress, I met several people, just days into their applicant period who had been opened in time for Congress. I had to wait three months. Is there a rule or is there not? First of all, there has to be consistency.

Secondly, if latihan is all about my personal experience of God, why am I to wait three months before beginning that communication? For recruitment purposes, I think this is deeply off-putting for new people and jars with the idea of a unique Divine connection. How can you explore whether it is for you without doing it? And what are people supposed to be doing during the applicant period? I was told to read Bapak's talks and listen to other people's experiences of latihan. Why?

All the questions revolve around the implications of opening. The idea is that once you are opened you cannot 'go back' to being unopened. Others say that if you are opened early you are more likely to leave Subud. As far as I am aware, there is no data to back up this claim. I think we need to get clear about what we think happens in this moment – is it symbolic, like baptism, or is something opened that could not be open before, as is claimed in Reiki? Personally, I find it rather amusing that it can be claimed that I lacked the capacity to receive God's guidance without this ceremony. It's a nice, simple and welcoming ritual, but I don't think it warranted three months' wait. We must get clear about what we think opening is and why it is so significant that there is, for some, a waiting period. We must know why this is to justify it to our new members. If we have no justification, it needs to go.

## **What is it about Subud that I would like to share with the world and how might I do it?**

I think latihan is a great practice. It has helped me to access and trust my intuition at a more profound level and build trust in myself. I like the members of my Subud group, whom I find to be warm, wise and loving.

My concern is about recruitment and about access. If I am not a Bikram teacher, is it wrong to teach someone a yoga move that might help them? In my work, is it wrong for me to teach a way of communicating or relating to a parent in relation to their child, if the idea or model I teach is not mine? If I think a friend would benefit from the latihan practice, is it wrong for me to open them outside of the organisation?

In my training work with young people, I'm actively encouraging them to engage in practices that increase their fortitude, self awareness and self trust. I'd like them to know about latihan as one of these tools. If it's not possible or wise to introduce them to Subud, will I nevertheless introduce them to latihan among other practices and tools? Quite possibly. Ideally, I would like the practice to be grounded in a supportive group environment that welcomes a wide range of people and genuinely supports them. Whether that organisation will be Subud, remains to be seen. Will Subud be an organisation that exists to serve humanity and the happiness and development of its members, or does it exist primarily to serve its ego and itself?

So I'm struggling a bit just now, between a sense of having found a spiritual family and

practice that meets my need for community, and simultaneously discovering that, like any other family, there are squabbles and differences. This is not helped by me despising all things bureaucratic, because to me they inhibit creativity and responsibility. My solution would thus be to continue sharing the gift of latihan without focusing too much on the 'organizational dynamics', because, really, that isn't the important thing. The important thing is to provide a safe, practical and cathartic framework for people of any faith to deepen their connection to intuitive guidance and wisdom. By doing this, we support ourselves and others in taking the positive actions that *are* God's work and that, at this juncture in our history, need doing.