

Confession of an ex-Latihaneer

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My name is John Elwyn Kimber and I have been opened, but not necessarily in Subud, for thirty-two years.

- On the analogy of ‘mountaineer’, or ‘engineer’, I’ve tended to call myself an independent ‘Latihaneer’ rather than a Subud member. I define a Latihaneer as anyone who likes the Latihan more than they like Subud, whether or not they’re involved in a Subud group.
- I ceased to define myself as a Subud member ever since being one of those who were virtually drummed out of Subud for daring to criticise the Anugraha project in the early 1980s. So we didn’t stay around for long enough to be proved right.
- I am not an active member of Subud these days. Nor am I planning to return to a Subud group. So although I’ve been invited by the *Subud Vision* editors to contribute my views, after several drafts I’ve decided that I don’t feel qualified to prescribe or even suggest any ‘solutions’ to the problem of Subud, 2010.

If indeed there is a problem, that is; as many contributors to *Subud Vision* believe. Whether there is a problem or not depends, I suppose, upon what sort of Subud organisation you may want and whether you think you (or the world) are getting it or not.

I wish especially to re-emphasise that my views are not necessarily those of the *Subud Vision* editors, so they are not to be blamed for my own heretical opinions. As the case for change within Subud is already being made very ably by other *Subud Vision* contributors, I feel, upon reflection, that the only fresh contribution I can offer is to write a couple of statements. Firstly, ‘Why I Am No Longer in Subud’; and secondly, ‘Why I Can No Longer Practice Latihan Regularly’.

I hope I’m not so conceited as to assume anyone in Subud would care very much one way or the other whether I am in Subud or not. But since I am part of that majority of about nine to one — or so I understand — who once were Subud members and are no longer, perhaps my reasons may be of interest to some readers.

This, by the way, is not going to be a display of venomousness or ill-temper. In the last analysis, I see no particular reason to bear Subud any ill-will. It is no more self-contradictory than many other organisations, spiritual, religious, or otherwise.

Why I Am No Longer in Subud

In a nutshell, I am no longer in Subud because I agree with *Subud Vision* contributor Merin Nielsen. Merin states that he joined Subud because he expected it to be as it advertised itself: a supra-religious, ecumenical, universalist forum for people to meet and practice Latihan together, regardless of race, religion, or cultural background.

Although, unlike me, Merin has stayed in Subud, I think this must be because his liking for group Latihan outweighs the fact that he disagrees pretty fundamentally with just about every other Subud member he knows. Most of these members appear to display many of the symptoms of ‘Bapakism’, so-called; a syndrome which more liberal latihaneers deplore, not least in the pages of *Subud Vision*.

I concur with the use of the term ‘Bapakism’ to refer to the tendency to turn Subud

into what it is supposed not to be, namely, a fringe-religion: by treating Bapak's talks as Holy Writ, Bapak as the infallible pope or prophet of Subud, Bapak's family as an apostolic succession, helpers' groups as a quasi-priesthood, Cilandak as a Holy Place, and the world as divisible into two groups, these being loyal Subud members (the saved) and the rest of us (the not-yet-saved and the damned).

Now this may be a logical, albeit fairly fundamentalist *religious* creed, but it is of course quite irreconcilable with a universalist, *spiritual* ideal which says that we are all one, and all religions are inwardly compatible with one another: which is what Subud claims will become apparent to anybody who practices Latihan for a while.

For Subud to be Subud in this more universalist sense it has to be available, and to *remain* available, to members of all of the world's religions, likewise to 'transcendental agnostics'. It cannot therefore be a religion itself. And yet, it would seem, a religion is what many (if not most?) active members want Subud to be.

If this is indeed the case, then I raise no objection, providing that Subud members are honest about it and cease to pretend that Subud is not a religion. How they reconcile this with Bapak's emphatic statement, 'Subud is not a religion'[1] is of course for them to decide. But they should not be trying to recruit people like me, who never will and never could consent to convert to a belief-system such as Bapakism.

Because all that seems to happen to Bapakists who practice Latihan for a while is that they come to the conclusion that *all religions are inwardly compatible with one another, and with Subud, just so long as they're compatible with Bapakism*. This was not my experience of Latihan when I was a regular practitioner. But in Subud it is customary that I cannot argue with somebody else's experience if it is different from mine.

Clearly, then, practice of Latihan does *not* lead to unanimity! This leaves Subud members with a dilemma. Universalism or Bapakism? And it's no use consulting the talks of Bapak to settle the question, since Bapak himself was utterly contradictory on the subject. He was quite capable of saying 'Don't trust gurus' one minute, and then referring to himself as the 'Jagad Guru' (World Teacher) the next. Bapak's only equal as a guru-hating guru was Jiddu Krishnamurti, a comparably confusing figure.

So if, on the other hand, there are still non-Bapakists who wish Subud to pursue a more ecumenical and supra-religious ideal in future, then logically they are either going to have to found a separate organisation, or force through some dramatic changes, starting with a drastic demythologising of the life and sayings of Bapak, plus a determined effort at networking with compatible tendencies and movements within and throughout the world's religions, broadening Subud's doctrinal base as much as possible.

I say 'doctrinal' advisedly, because where words are involved, doctrine is involved. So it would of course be disingenuous to pretend that Subud can entirely avoid having *some* doctrine, or that all tendencies within the world's religions are compatible with Subud. But there's doctrine and there's dogma, including, of course, Bapakist dogma.

Quite how the Bapakists and the liberal Latihaneers would ever arrive at a working compromise, I've no idea. It might work through concentrating upon, and retaining, only such doctrines of Bapak as can be reconciled with pre-existing teachings in the world's religious traditions.

Bapak, after all, claimed that his ‘explanations’ were optional for just this reason: that all essential doctrine already existed in the world’s religious literature. It is not hard to trace variations upon such major themes as the ‘seven levels’[2] and ancestry, [3] or inherited karma,[4] far and wide throughout the world’s scriptures. It is less easy to justify such statements as ‘women should not wear trousers to the Latihan’ with a representative cross-section of the world’s religious literature, or indeed square them with the assertion that there are no rules in Subud!

I am reliably informed that Bapakists are still fond of using the fall-back-position that ‘all rules in Subud are optional’. This is supposed to imply that liberals or radicals within Subud have no cause for complaint, since they are not bound by Bapakism, at least in theory. Well now: ‘optional’ implies that there are a range of options from which one can choose. I certainly never found this to be the case in Subud groups. In my experience, it was expected that either you would be willing to subscribe to some slight variant upon Bapakism, or you would be regarded as a dangerous eccentric, and be discouraged from remaining in Subud. No options there, then! I also gather from my reliable informants that not much has changed in this regard. In which case: how on earth can Subud claim to be ecumenical in the least? Any objective observer would simply dismiss it as yet another orientalist cult with universalist pretensions.

So here, I would judge, is one of the most glaring anomalies about Subud — to that selfsame objective and unprejudiced outsider. Which is that its doctrinal base is far *narrower* than you can often find among the more liberal members of any world religion today! So how it can claim to be offering a broadening of mind and consciousness via the Latihan can be a little hard to fathom at times, on the evidence of characteristic attitudes of Bapakist Subud members. In which case, what is Subud for?

And I doubt if, at present, the average helper knows much if anything at all about the religious or philosophical background of the average candidate: so the ‘enlightened’ helpers have no informed basis for discussion, no real grasp of the sheer breadth of the world’s religious opinion, and no way of gauging whether or not their own views are actually narrower than those of the ‘unenlightened’ applicant!

It may be the helpers who need to learn from the applicants, rather than the other way round. It is hard for anyone in Subud plausibly to pontificate on reconciling the world’s religious traditions when most have no idea what they are dealing with.

I suspect that Subud, at present, is not even as ecumenical as (for instance) the Anglican church, which makes great efforts at dialogue with other faiths. I never noticed that Subud helpers were interested in entering into dialogue with anybody.

But to conclude. It seemed clear to me even as far back as the Anugraha project that Subud as an organisation had a split personality: half-mystical, half-evangelical. I remember, for instance, how we were told that World War Three would start if the Anugraha project was not a success!

How’s that for emotional blackmail? It was reminiscent more of the Moonies than what some of us up till then had taken to be the ethos of Subud. And I only discovered much later that there had been a great deal of dubious behaviour (to put it mildly) at the top of the Anugraha project. With hindsight I am not surprised, but I found it shocking, even devastating, at the time.

All this reflected a split in Bapak’s own personality. Sometimes he spoke like a

proper mystic; sometimes like an autocratic evangelical preacher. I find evangelicalism in any form, Bapakism not excepted, utterly abhorrent and irredeemably unspiritual. So I have no wish to have anything to do with Bapakism, which, even as a fringe religion among many others, I regard as unusually narrow, cranky, bigoted, and backward.

I might have wanted to have something to do with Subud, had I not encountered a more serious difficulty. Many others, though, who are now lost to Subud probably would have stayed, if they had not found Bapakism so stifling. If the movement now has a recruitment crisis, I think it only has itself to blame.

Why I Can No Longer Practice Latihan Regularly

But to explain my ‘more serious difficulty’, I shall have to start by defining three kinds of response to the Latihan.

- 1) Under-sensitivity: being unaffected, or hardly affected at all.
- 2) Normal sensitivity: being moderately affected.
- 3) Hyper-sensitivity: being over-affected even by very moderate exposure to Latihan.

I’d like to say straight away that I do not regard Category 3 as a sign of especial spiritual aptitude any more than it is a virtue to be highly susceptible to sunburn. But I’m willing to bet that the overwhelming majority of long-term Subud members are in Category 2.

As a matter of interest I believe that the late Idries Shah Sayed — even if he is a bit of a hate figure to some Subud members — might have been right to have said that the people with real spiritual aptitude were more likely to be those in Category 1: impervious, in other words, to subjective states, or able to be more objective about them.

Be that as it may, it is many years now since my response to Latihan ceased to be Category 2, becoming Category 3 instead. I never went in for ‘mixing’, and I’ve never practised excessive Latihans. Nevertheless, after I left Subud, I found that my Latihan followed me around, becoming stronger, more insistent, more spontaneous. By turns annoyed, puzzled, or acquiescent, sometimes I resisted it, sometimes not.

About ten years after leaving Subud, it can be described as having ‘erupted’, partly as a result of my entertaining a heady brew of high mystical ideas inspired by my reading of Satprem’s book.^[5] It was the first time I’d read anything which corroborated my own intuitive and spontaneous thoughts on the Latihan and ‘receiving’ generally, as distinct from the orthodox Subud view.

Since which time, I’ve found it only takes a few Latihans to muffle my ordinary mental activity so much that I end up, sometimes for weeks, in a Zen-like mood of what I can only describe as mystical reverie. It is like living in an endless succession of calm, bright impressionist paintings, rather relentlessly in the here and now, and in an unvarying emotional state of serene indifference.

It’s all very well perceiving that all human beings are one, being variations upon one another; and that all things are finite yet luminous manifestations of an infinite potentiality, invisibly charging all visible appearances with the energies that sustain them; so that one might understandably conclude that all existence swims in an unfathomable sea of Divine radiance, sometimes referred to as ‘love’. Or other words to the same effect. But it can all get to be a bit of a strain on the brain after a while.

It is, I suppose, a sort of trance, perhaps indefinitely sustainable, and some might even think it to be a state of enlightenment; but I certainly don't, because in such a condition the individual totally disappears, having no scope either for reflection or action; therefore there is nobody there to be enlightened.

Which in itself sounds like the sort of Zen paradox that some mystics would delight in.

The trouble is that ultimately I'm not just a mystic, but also a poet and a romantic. I find this condition of semi-or-quasi-satori [6] or whatever it is to be fatiguing, even dull, after the novelty wears off. An 'illuminated' zombie is still a bit of a zombie. One *perceives*, but one does not *understand*. Which results in a sort of cognitive impotence. One needs to be able to take a step back; but as long as this beatific trance continues, the attention is taken entirely by the moment, and 'perspective', or reflection, is impossible.

Since I cannot invoke my Latihan without evoking this state of consciousness, it follows that I cannot practice Latihan nowadays for any length of time. I would be interested to discover whether there are other practitioners who have experienced this difficulty.

Now I'm well aware that what I'm describing sounds like a mild or partial form of *samadhi*,[7] and that Bapak was not a fan of *samadhi*. Also that the modern Hindu mystical poet and visionary Sri Aurobindo, also very keen on 'receiving' was of the opinion that *samadhi* was *not* the ultimate mystical state.

If my own limited experience is anything to go by, I quite agree, even on the basis of a few glimpses of the kind of consciousness it entails. It stalls everything in a condition of contemplative paralysis, with no more evolutionary possibility of *becoming*, and therefore accessing yet more comprehensive and expansive realms of awareness. But my problem remains.

Despite the fact that I'm not a Zen Buddhist and did not seek out any such state, practising Latihan invariably induces in me a condition which answers pretty well to the classic descriptions of *satori*; except that *satori* is supposed to be a supremely desirable mystical goal, whereas as far as I'm concerned it is almost irrelevant to many of my true inner concerns, except inasmuch as it puts the mind's normal incessant inner dialogue into some kind of perspective.

I even wondered whether it was the result of practicing too many Latihans on my own, so I rejoined a group a few years back to see if it made any difference. It didn't. Therefore in the last analysis I agree with Ram Prasad Sen, Ramakrishna's teacher, who once remarked: 'Sugar I like, but I have no desire to become sugar!'

I can only conclude that if such realms of consciousness are accessible to so erratic and inadequate a visionary as myself, then they cannot be anything like as rare as some would suppose. I also now find it easier to see how the Latihan corroborates the claims made for it, since it takes no great stretch of imagination to understand that what a Zen monk might call an 'enlightened' state, a Christian, with a different temperament and terminology, might equally well describe as a state of grace.

The problem for me is that the simple and stark contrast between a self totally absorbed in itself and its worldly pre-occupations, and a self-effaced self totally absorbed in 'grace' or 'enlightenment' explains nothing about what the individual is *for*, what the mind is *for*, what civilisation or evolution or any notion of destiny is *for*.

All this ‘enlightenment’ could happen as easily to an amoeba as to a human being. It is merely a serene sense of undifferentiated being. So why all the travail and tragedy of our planetary history? Simply to escape it again? But this implies that the Divine is in the habit of practicing cruel jokes upon creation. What sort of a Divine Power would that be?

There is, in other words, a huge gulf between ordinary consciousness and this kind of ‘illumination’.

So absolute a withdrawal of consciousness from attachment to the world leaves no bridge between the two. Sri Aurobindo felt the same, being both poet and mystic. I’m not sure what I feel about his own ultimate ‘solution’ to this problem, but I think he’s one of the few people I’ve ever read or heard about who posed the essential questions.

Bapak hinted at them here and there, perhaps because of that Sufi background he was so ambivalent about, but not in a way which I found helpful. And unfortunately none of this changes the fact that my Latihan got permanently stuck at this point.

So: had I the choice all over again, knowing what I know now, would I have consented to be opened? Despite the close friends I’ve made among Subud members/Latihaneers, I’d have to say no.

I’ve had to learn the hard way how to ‘deactivate’^[8] my Latihan when things get too intense, and the techniques for doing so have not come from Bapak or the helpers, but from western Hermetic tradition.

To me, the vestigial symptoms of my susceptibility to Latihan can be a bloody nuisance, and I can well understand how some long-term Subud members have come to feel ‘trapped’ by their Latihans. Once turned on, it’s hard to turn off, but unless you truly have control of the off-switch, it seems to me that you cannot be said to be exercising free will when you practice Latihan.

Since if there is one thing that God is said to treat with absolute respect it is individual free will, the question arises whether the Latihan is really ‘from God’ at all, rather than a risky, auto-hypnotic technique that might be better avoided. On this question, other Latihan practitioners will have to make up their own minds.

Perhaps the risk is inherent in the Latihan method. To invoke ‘charismatic’ methodology to effect a rapid and dramatic bridge between everyday and inner awareness risks never reaching the ultimate goal, which is sufficient inner stillness to make higher realms of being perceptible.

Instead, one may simply exchange outer for inner agitation, the movements and sounds of Latihan being analogous to the dreams and rapid eye movements of ordinary sleep. The waking, mystical equivalent of *deep* sleep may never be attained; so that one is left with ‘the tail wagging the dog’, as the practitioner remains thrall to the comparatively superficial phenomena that he or she may generate, perhaps for years or even decades.

I have no idea whether I’m right about this. I only mention it as a possibility. But for myself, I wish I’d stuck from the start with systematic, reversible, step-by-step techniques for exploring the various domains of consciousness, such as are taught in reputable magical lodges. I find the Latihan far too haphazard, though I’ve met one or

two individuals who find this entirely congenial, and good luck to them. It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

But since I'm nobody and nothing special, my experience makes me wonder how many other ex-Subud members may be in the same boat as myself, with similar 'crises' to report. Does anybody know?

And if not, *why* not, given that Subud, despite its tiny size, has a committee for everything? Is it not long past time that Subud members gave some thought to the question of why so many ex-members are ex-members? I rather suspect that some of these individuals may have much stranger tales to tell than mine.

When that particular committee reports back, quoting a representative sample of interviewees, I hope I'll be around to read it. In the meantime, I wish all practitioners of Latihan well, and for your own sakes I hope you all have a less interesting time than me!

Notes

1. 'Subud cannot be said to be a religion or a school of thought. It cannot be called so, for nothing is taught nor is there anything in the nature of a system of ideas in Subud.' *Pewarta XII*, 5, pp. 135–7. Cilandak, November 24, 1973.

'The *latihan kejiwaan* of Subud is, by its nature, an exercise or training, not a kind of teaching, not some skill and also not some kind of study. Thus this *latihan kejiwaan* is naturally not a religion. This Subud is a *paguyuban* (Javanese 'fraternity'), a meeting place, an association of people who have received mercy from God, who are inspired by God and who automatically receive guidance in their *jiwa*. That is why there is not the least bit of theory in Subud.'

The Way Ahead, p. 24. Wolfsburg, West Germany, June 14, 1975.

2. Seven Levels. The 'levels' are there in Sufi lore, e.g. Rumi, Suhrawardi, and Shattar (which, I gather, is where Gurdjieff's version came from; see *The Teachers of Gurdjieff*, by 'Rafael Lefort'.). Or try the Kabbalah (ten Sephiroth, seven levels). For the original Jewish version, read the entry in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* (available on line). For the gentile/occultist version, try *The Mystical Qabalah* by Dion Fortune, or *The Ladder of Lights* by W G Gray. The 'seven storey mountain' is a commonplace image in Roman Catholic mysticism: see Thomas Merton's book of that title. The four lower forces are surely implicit, frozen into a feudal social order, in the Indian caste system. Sri Aurobindo (see below) also has an interesting variant. The common source is of course knowledge of the chakras, or *Latayyif* in Arabic, even though there are important differences between Yogic and Sufi lore on the subject: see Idries Shah, *The Sufis*.

3. The obvious 'Biblical' quote on ancestry, 'the sins of the fathers shall be visited on the sons', is proverbial but difficult to track down in the Bible in this form. Euripides and Horace (and Shakespeare) are quoted as having said the same thing.

4. In Asia of course there is the doctrine of Karma, which may or may not be amended or annulled by Divine grace, depending on how strict a Buddhist you might be.

5. Satprem (Bernard Enginger) was for many years the amanuensis of Mirra Alfassa ('The Mother'), Sri Aurobindo's mystical collaborator, at their ashram in Pondicherry,

southern India. *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness* is his best-known book and well worth reading by anybody with an interest in the mysticism of receiving, particularly if they like Hindu tradition more than did Bapak. Just about the only Indian Latihan group that is not in a major city is (or was) at Pondicherry.

6. *Satori* is a Japanese Buddhist term for ‘enlightenment’ which literally means ‘understanding’ or ‘spiritual awakening’, in Zen referring to a flash of sudden awareness. See Paul Reps’ *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*.

7. *Samadhi* is a Sanskrit term used to denote higher levels of concentrated meditation. For a good example of *samadhi* see Satprem’s account of Sri Aurobindo’s experiences in the Alipore jail when imprisoned by the British Raj.

8. ‘Deactivating’ a Latihan: the technique is basic and straightforward, but one may have to be persistent at first. Once opened, I think you can only make a Latihan dormant; a certain degree of hypersensitivity will always remain.