

## Back on the Road Again

By Marcus Bolt

An experienced Indonesian helper[1] once said, 'Subud is as practical as a motor garage.' This was said in answer to a member's question about how we should describe Subud when people asked whether Subud was a new religion. He said: 'Imagine a beautiful park in the middle of a city. There are several excellent roads leading to the park from the city boundaries. One road is signposted "Buddhism", another "Islam", another Christianity", another "Judaism" and so on. We are each given a vehicle to carry us to the park. But we find this vehicle is defective: its tyres are flat, its body is dented, its transmission is choked and, above all, there is no fuel. So we take it to a motor garage to have it attended to. When this is done, we can take any of the roads - they all take us to the park. Subud is a motor garage.'

Varindra Vittachi, *A Reporter in Subud*. (Dharma Publications, 1963. Reprinted by SPI 2003) p. 64.

The above quotation made a great impact on me when I first read it nearly forty years ago. Having recently revisited it, I am convinced the metaphor still holds good today as an essential, albeit poetic, definition of the functioning of Subud's core experience. I also believe that attempting to define the latihan in terms of our pre-Subud, Abrahamic religious experiences has led to a forgetting of the latihan's actual purpose and value.[2]

Someone once wrote, tongue in cheek no doubt: 'Judging by the pictures, hell looks the more interesting place,' and I have to say I agree in principle. The conventional descriptions of heaven, in both the Bible and the Koran, never appealed to me, yet I have always been a 'seeker', someone with a teleological mindset, believing myself to be on a journey with some kind of 'heavenly' or numenistic goal at the end.

It wasn't until my twenties, when I had an impossible-to-describe 'mystical' experience[3] under the influence of an hallucinogenic drug, that I managed to create a vague notion of my sought after destination. Thus, for me, the park represents - what? Nirvana? Pure being? Bliss? Total consciousness? The Golden eternity? 'I' will never know, of course.[4]

The Vittachi metaphor can also, I maintain, be extended to include any goal-oriented journey, or individual road to completeness, as well as the religious life. So, I would call my road 'Eclecticism Street'.

My eclectic reading led me to believe that the kind of assistance symbolised by Varindra's metaphor had existed since Homo sapiens emerged, and that many have had undeniable, first hand experience of its workings over the millennia. Allusions to its existence seemed to crop up in many cultures, religions and belief systems. Some called it the Power of God, or the Holy Spirit, some the

work of the gods; others were convinced it was a beneficent universal energy; yet more took it to be nature's self-tuning survival device - or even evolution itself, considering mankind as 'a work in progress'. Some referred to it as grace. It was described variously as a numinous presence, a benign and providential energy, a completeness which humanity is connected to yet separated from, and so on.

And it appeared to me that it could manifest itself in a variety of forms; religious experience, dreams, visions, genius, inspiration, synchronicity, coincidence - even in some aspects of what we term 'insanity'. I was made further aware that a plethora of techniques has been employed to seek out and enlist its assistance: prayer, formal fasts, meditation, self-deprivation, as well as 'a complete derangement of the senses' (Rimbaud), yoga, martial arts, ritual dance and (more recently) psychotherapy, to name but a few. But it also appeared that results were random, sporadic, uncertain, and uncoordinated, or so I found as a seeker. My searching was like working through a massive telephone directory, looking for a number when I didn't even know the name.

So there I was, stranded on a road with a nebulous goal, out of fuel and desperately seeking the help I was certain was there.

I finally stumbled upon it in what I still take to be one of its many guises as 'Subud latihan'. This was claimed by Subud's founder to be the latest, hi-tech version, specially reformulated to fit in with our contemporary, on-the-run lifestyle, on call 24/7 and freely available at a Subud House near you. Furthermore, it was a tailor-made, 'one-to-one' service, and no money, beliefs, study, training or special techniques were required (or so it said on the tin).[5]

Unfortunately, some years down the line, many of us who have benefited from this new manifestation's assistance (through joining Subud) have allowed it to go to our heads. Through a combination of hubristic delusion, laziness, a lack of enquiry and a failure to follow our own basic tenets, many of us have ended up believing that it exists for us alone. We declare that the latihan is unique and has been sent by the creator of the park to facilitate only our journeys, and that the mission is to bring a new order of peace, harmony and enlightenment to the world. We then, by some extraordinary sleight of hand, transmogrified our homespun artefact, with its patina of Javanese and Sufi mysticism, pseudo-religiosity, insider language and coded behaviour, into a road in its own right - and we named it, semi-officially, 'The Subud Way'.

And I believe this is where we, the Subud Association, are getting it wrong. In formulating ourself as a 'way', we have lost our way. For you can't convert the universal 'garage' into something it's not; you can't bend it to your will, dress it up in your own language and imagery and then claim it as your very own road. Those that do so are living a delusion.

The main 'roads' in the metaphor have in common a prophet, a holy book, a priesthood, and a set of prescribed laws, beliefs and behaviours. As this seems to be the model we are attempting to emulate, here are some simple tinkering that might help us get off our 'road to nowhere' and back on our individual tracks again:

### **Prophet**

By all means honour and respect Muhammad Subuh and his work, but don't call him Prophet, celebrate his birthday or make him into some kind of medium through whom God speaks. He stated quite clearly that he was like a janitor in a school, setting up desks and cleaning the blackboard. 'You are the pupils', he continued, 'and the teacher is God.' (59 CSP 9). He was a wise man and a lot of his advice is invaluable and helpful, but plenty is irrelevant today - you have to pick the bones out for yourself.

And stop treating Ibu Rahayu as 'Bapak's successor' - I doubt if she wants that (plus all the kow-towing that goes with it). In her talks, she mostly reiterates what her Dad said, yet some of us treat her words as revelatory. Why? We really should have worked it out for ourselves by now, anyway.

Perhaps, too, we should stop referring to Muhammad Subuh as 'Bapak' outside of Indonesia, where the word is an honorific. Using such terms as 'Father' for a leader is one of the defining traits of a cult, and I find myself having to make excuses for it to those enquiring about Subud (exacerbated by then having to explain that the acronym SuBuD is not etymologically related to the name of its founder and that he is not, therefore, Mr. Subud, nor are we Subuhists or Subuhans).

### **Holy Book**

Avoid turning Muhammad Subuh's talks into tablets of stone - a 'Rule Book for (Subud )Living'. They are contextual and evolutionary and he made it clear that: 'In Subud we do not have a book... the book is our own understanding... but it's not a book that is supposed to be kept as a kind of authority because it changes all the time...' (77 YYZ 2). Enough said?[6]

### **Priesthood**

It would be difficult to imagine a system more likely to be embraced with alacrity by those with a predilection for class structures, hierarchies and badges of office than Subud's helper system, with its 'helper for life when you've done seven years' convention and its ranks - candidate, local, regional, national, zonal and international. Muhammad Subuh initiated the system in the Fifties and it reflects his own hierarchical culture (and possibly even the structure of the Dutch East Indies Railway, for which he worked in the 1920s). The 'helper' concept needs a major overhaul - a different name, one-year stints, candidates voted in because they are able and respected by members,

for example. Such an edifice as we have erected cannot be tolerated or sustained in today's social climate - especially in a self-styled spiritual association.

As a corollary of the above and to help quash the concept bandied around that we are a theocracy and helpers have a hot-line to God, let's delete the custom of 'testing in' new office holders. (If Muhammad Subuh is correct that our testing is only 10% or so accurate, it figures that tossing a coin would have better odds.) Instead, let those interested in serving make their pitch and be chosen by the membership for their abilities, attitudes, integrity and humanity. We're all grown-ups now.

### **Beliefs, Laws and Prescribed Behaviour**

Muhammad Subuh claimed the latihan was for all mankind - but how can it be so if it has become predominantly middle class, heavily flavoured with Islamic ideology and Javanese folklore and, in order to feel fully accepted as a member, one is expected to profess a belief in an Abrahamic God? Not forgetting being pressured into accepting attitudes inherited from Subud's founder which are derived from, in the most part, anachronistic laws decreed in ancient texts (such as those on homosexuality, for example)? It doesn't add up.

By all means keep Subud international - it's one of its strong points, but divest it of its (tacitly official) Islamic and Indonesian language - except, perhaps, in Indonesia. In the United States, explain what we do US-style, the same for Australia, the UK, Canada and so on. Top advertising agencies invariably set up national offices, employing local creatives in tune with the sensibilities, mores and language of the host country. Talking in terms people understand makes marketing sense - so why don't we do that? Maybe, deep down, we want to keep it small.

Myth-bust wherever and whenever you can. Subud's (again tacitly official) Chinese Whispers-style mythology, redolent with Javanese superstition and white magic, poisons our children's minds with toxic little notions such as everyone has a 'true talent' and a 'true life partner', or that 'only married women can go to heaven' and so on, ad nauseam.

Let's quietly drop name change, sungkem, selamatans, pilgrimages to Bapak's grave, the officious three month waiting period et al. To me they are reminiscent of those cultish bolt-on extras young men add to their 'street-cred' cars (big bore exhausts and chromium plated wheels etc). We can be such posers.

Make the organisation serve the membership again. Please, no more political wheeler-dealing, or manipulative Congress/large enterprise decisions made on the back of the 'testing results' of a self-serving elite. Stop talking the talk

and start walking the walk, as they say. Let's get a little integrity, honesty and congruence back into our dealings.

By all means, let us continue together in groups, attempting to be supportive and caring, but let's also try to get out there in the world as individuals (if you aren't already), practising 'community spirit' - that sense of 'because we're all in this together, it benefits me to help and care for you' - which resonates with social health and well-being.

Overall, let's employ the KISS formula - keep it simple, stupid. No more overweening statements about being a theocratic movement, or dressing Subud up as some vast, superior conglomerate created by Almighty God Himself to save the world from those on 'the satanic level'. [7] We're not the chosen ones; we haven't done anything yet anyway (and we never will if we continue to ghettoise ourselves). Perpetuating the myth of our special status as a 'road' on the one hand, while on the other claiming we're not a new religion or a cult, portrays us as simpletons at best and hypocrites at worst.

In conclusion, there are many positive and good things about Subud: the accessibility and ease of practice of the latihan; the fact that people of all religions (and none) can and do exercise together; the - for the most part - sincerity of its members and their genuine desire to act well in the world; no (official) uniform as in some spiritual organisations (thank God the peci and long dresses are out nowadays); the lack of racism, the falling away of sexism and so on. But we really need to release ourselves from Subud-centric introversion in order to become a more caring, open, tolerant and, dare I say it, attractive network again.

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1. Even the late, great Varindra has to preface this quotation with the three words 'experienced', 'Indonesian' and 'helper' in order to give it weight and credibility.
2. ...that is how it is and that is why this spiritual training is training to be alive. In fact, the term 'spiritual' is not the right term to use. However, there was no other way to describe this training; there was not another term that fitted the nature of the latihan. When Bapak called it 'training to live' [people asked], 'What does "training to live" mean? Why do we have to train to live? We are already alive aren't we, so what do we need training for?' So Bapak had to change the name to 'spiritual training'. The correct term is 'training for human life'. That is why every part of you is brought to life... (67 NYC 3)  
Was this decision to change the 'strap line' the moment when Subud altered course? I wonder how different Subud would be today if Muhammad Subuh had kept to his original terminology.
3. Re-reading this article, I wonder whether those of us who had a pre-Subud, hallucinogenic drug 'mystical experience' might have been better positioned to grasp the nature and goals of the latihan more than those who had only a traditional Christian or Moslem upbringing. We have all mapped our old experience over the new and, to my mind, it seems like the 'religious' have made Subud intolerable to the 'mystics' - and, perhaps, vice versa.
4. Some time after, I developed a full-blown, anxiety depression. My 24/7 terror was about death and 'nothingness'. Ironically, forty years later, my desire is to end up unpolarised and self-less - a 'no thing'.

5. Does the latihan do what it says on the tin? After forty years I can say I seem to be more sensitive, more empathetic, more creative and no longer anxious about uncertainty. But I'm no healthier, richer or more spiritual than when I joined. So, yes. If you read between the lines, it does.

6. It amazes me how the finger-waggers pick from the talks only that which reinforces their prejudices and echoes their dogma, while remaining blind to passages such as this.

7. Purportedly, Muhammad Subuh once replied to the question, 'Why is there war?' with the answer, 'Because there is war in yourself.' I have no idea, and don't care if this was original or not, because that, I believe, is where the battle lines are drawn. From it I infer that I need to sort myself out first and foremost, living my life along my road, calling into the 'garage' as and when I need it. That's the best, and only, contribution I can make to a safe and peaceful world.