

# Process, not Prozac

By Marcus Bolt

Bapak defined the three words that make up the acronym Subud as: '*Susila* means having the quality of humanity; *budhi* means the power of the greatness of God that is within the self of a human being; and *dharma* means the utmost surrender to the greatness of God by a human being....' 59 SFO 1

As *budhi* is inherent, I infer that we all have the potential to be a Gandhi, a Hitler or, most likely, something in between (I guess depending on the nature and strength of the non-spiritual side of our duality). *Dharma* seems to be a grace, something embryonic, implanted during the Subud opening (or equivalent form of religious experience), an attribute that can grow if we are diligent in our worship. *Susila*, though, unless we have a 'Road to Damascus' epiphany, is our own responsibility, our choice. It is something we can put into practice—or not—once we have 'allowed' *budhi* and *dharma* to develop within.

The whole phrase symbolises an aspirational state of being, the achievement of which, it is believed, is an individual's ticket to heaven. It then follows that as our Association has the acronymic name Subud, *susila budhi dharma* must be a corporate goal as well—a kind of mission statement to remind us how we should corporately be and act in the world.

Back in the early seventies, shortly after the President of a large country left office somewhat ignominiously, the Subud National Chair of the same country was forced to resign over some financial irregularities. The then World Subud Association Chair, picking up on this apparent coincidence in an informal talk he gave at Swanwick, posed the conundrum, 'Does Subud reflect the world, or does the world reflect Subud?' The Chair, ever the diplomat and, I think in retrospect, keen to lessen the shock of one of our own going 'off the rails', went on to indicate that he believed because Subud was such a powerful, God-given tool for inner change, our influence was such that the world almost certainly reflected Subud. And, therefore, if we were bad, the state of the world would worsen[1]—and *vice versa*.

Believing this made us feel rather special in those fervent, heady pioneering days. Subud, was 'for all mankind' and, we believed, as our inner natures improved, as we became—individually and as an Association—more 'Subud', so millions would join, attracted by our way of 'doing business' in finance, culture, education and welfare. This was to be the way we would eventually transform the world into a virtual paradise of brothers and sisters living together in peace under our Almighty Father's roof. We believed this was God's Will, and it would happen through a form of spiritual osmosis once the aspired-to state of 'Subud' was achieved.

Thirty-plus years on, I have to admit that the answer to the first part of the conundrum seems more realistic. Our Association remains the same size and appears, somewhat banally, to merely be a reflection of the world and all its nefarious ways.[2] So, why have we so far failed, when we once seemed to have so much promise, so much potential? Exactly what has gone wrong and why?

In a later talk, Bapak expands on the theme of *susila*, saying: '*Susila* means that... you are able...to possess human morality: that is, the manners, conduct and compassion of human beings...in accordance with God's will. This indicates that you

need to become people who have a sense of compassion.... If you are truly compassionate...you will be an example for society to follow.' 66 BDO 1

Reading that, we have to ask ourselves: Have we, as the Subud Association, achieved that morality, that level of humanity, as a natural way of operating in the world? Could we really be described in that way?

To be brutally honest, I don't think we can. We are an Association that has been, at various times over the last fifty years, as hypocritical as the UN, as self-serving as any multinational, as dissembling as any government, as hidebound by dogma, insider language and conformity as any cult, and as arrogantly convinced we are God's chosen as any other spiritual/religious organisation. We call ourselves Subud, yet we demonstrate little compassion or humaneness—even to our own members.[3]

This conclusion is supported by the undeniable existence of a large pool of peripheral and ex-members, who are, or have been, disaffected by Subud: people who have been wounded by the Subud Association (or its individual members—singly or in witch-hunting gangs); people hurt emotionally, financially, psychologically, or all three.

Oh, I can almost hear you thinking, 'Surely that's because they brought it on themselves...; it's ancestral...; it's because they have a victim mentality...' and so on, all of which may be true. But a victim's need for victimisation does not give *carte blanche* to the persecutor. For every crime victim, there has to be a criminal. Would anyone think it justice to send the burglary victim to prison along with the burglar because the windows were left unlocked?

Dark dealings in Subud, sadly, are manifold. They range from the directors of a large enterprise continuing to sell shares knowing full well the company was about to fail, to people made scapegoats and removed from office by those with personal agendas. There have also been swindles by our wealthy, self-appointed rulers and Machiavellian power struggles within their ranks, as well as temporary changes to legal Constitutions and engineered Congresses—all contrived to achieve required, 'for the common good' outcomes. There are examples of fortunes being squandered on internecine court cases and the resultant devious legal wrangling; of corrupt and bungled enterprises that deviated far from Bapak's original vision because of egotism and personal greed for money or power; of neighbouring countries that do not communicate with one another; of groups within groups; of cunning spin-doctoring that would be the envy of a totalitarian government and many, many instances of individuals being treated unjustly, carelessly—their livelihoods and homes compromised or lost.... The list is long.

But, in another sense, *none of this should matter*. It's to be expected, unavoidable, par for the course. After all, we are the 'halt and the lame' and we bring massive inner disability to the wedding feast. In truth, reading between Bapak's lines, this is all supposed to happen! Bapak called it 'grains of rice rubbing together until they are smooth'. It's the process of purification. I think it was Varindra Vittachi who used the analogy of cleaning a pond. It looks clear until you dredge up the mud at the bottom, then the pond goes pretty murky for a while. And that's the stage we're at—pretty murky.

What does matter though—enormously—is that we seem to have a tacit corporate desire to pretend it *isn't* happening. A spooky inner need to portray ourselves to ourselves (and society) as a *Stepford Wives*[4]-type community. A sanitised, squeaky-clean presentation of our Subud world in which mistakes, conflict, disasters,

sadness, human frailty, criminality, failure, losing one's faith and so on are quietly pushed aside and made taboo. These are topics deemed unfit for (mainly Subud) public consumption. We tend to live out—through our media, in our groups and at our gatherings—a saccharine, one-fit version of Subud: one in which investigation and discussion are deemed 'gossip', the need for answers becomes 'criticism' and analysis of behaviour, especially if psychologically led, is labelled 'mixing' (yet many of us despise and revile this situation in private). In all cases of Subud disaffection (and I would guess every group has at least one person who has been disaffected over the years) there are, of course, many facets to the story, but for some reason, the victim's tale is rarely told. Why do we need the illusion of only good news, of unjustified perfection? Why do we allow ourselves to be thus deluded?

This, I maintain, is Subud as Prozac, not Subud as process. It's akin to an addictive drug that masks and represses symptoms, giving the illusory, surface appearance that all is well. A drug that allows a trancelike stumbling through the day and a semblance of normality, but which blocks the patient from searching for the root causes of the underlying sickness and, therefore, ultimately denies the full, 'playing out' process that is essential for healing.

But how did this come to pass? Why do we do it? Why do we join Subud professing the need to change, yet do everything in our power to protect the illusion that 'nothing is rotten in the state of Denmark'?

The story of the chiropractor and the little girl with a twisted spine may provide a clue. During a session, he managed to straighten her spine. When her mother arrived to collect her daughter, the little girl ran to her and said, 'Mummy! Mummy! This man has twisted my back all up!' In other words, we tend to prefer even a distorted *status quo* to reality. It's cosy, it's safe and it's what we know.

Personally, I believe we preserve our Subud distortion by the subtle employment of a cultish mythology, one that has been home grown and nurtured over the years. A mythology that is an accretion of Indonesian superstition and anecdotal, Chinese Whispers-style stories; hearsay held as unassailable truths. These blend seamlessly with our Western culture of devil-take-the-hindmost, of self-interest and the desire to feel 'special', the chosen ones. This belief system is unconsciously cultivated by inadequately trained helpers and perpetuated by masquerading, self-styled helper-gurus—the masters of low quality testing[5] underwritten by out-of-context misinterpretation of Bapak's talks.

The part of the mythology that scares me the most seems to hold that all feelings are 'lower-force-driven *nafsu*'[6] (to use some Subud High Jargonese), negative energies that must be either purged from our system, or kept locked away and never expressed—even feelings of compassion. A typical story told to me by an older helper goes: 'There was this man in Indonesia whose business was going down the tubes and another brother lent him some money to bail him out. Then that man's business failed. And Bapak said that was because he had taken on the first man's burden....' Now this may well be contextually true, but when such stories are quoted—even if well meant—as an excuse to do nothing, we are far, far from *susila*. And when they are used as blanket proof that to be a Good Samaritan will either deny the sufferer a chance of redemption, or will invite 'taking it on' (thereby blocking one's own progress), we are further removed still.

A woman in our group, when asked about her feelings on the 2005 tsunami,[7] I remember, just shrugged and said, 'I cannot think about that. It is the will of Almighty God....' She meant that she should not interfere, should feel no compassion, that it is

their (ancestral) problem and that they brought it on themselves. Involvement would somehow hamper her spiritual growth.

But, you know, if we are open and direct, if we address troubling issues, if we are compassionate and willing to listen to those in difficulties, nothing terrible happens. Our latihan don't grind to a halt and other people's troubles don't drag us down. When we care, we actually become stronger.

In 2006, at my old group, the new Chair organised an evening for the 'disaffected ones' (about 25% of the group after a stormy year)—those who, for many and personal reasons, don't come to the group for latihan any more (they still do latihan, mostly, but at home or in other groups). My wife and I were the only 'disaffected ones' who turned up...so the meeting centred on us. This was an important step in my rehabilitation, because up till then, if ever I raised the subject of my disaffection, members either reacted by saying, 'Haven't you got over that yet?' or implied testily, 'All families have little spats; just move on.' The most hurtful was when they metaphorically 'reached for the holy water', self-protecting by disappearing inside themselves, a well-worn Subud ploy for avoiding difficult issues.

Our local International Helper facilitated the meeting and kicked off with music to my ears by saying that, in his experience, groups can't grow if there are unaddressed issues lurking 'under the carpet'.

So, my wife and I told it like it was (for us). We didn't mention names, and we only expressed our feelings (without petulance, I hope). We explained how isolating it felt to be 'tested out' of home and job after ten-plus years as live-in caretakers of the Subud House, at the very heart of the group—especially as we weren't involved in the testing; how painful it felt to be informed that it was our very presence that was holding back the group's development. We also explained just how demeaning it felt to receive a writ from Subud Britain's solicitors ordering us to vacate the premises, and how unjust it seemed to have our contractual notice period overruled and cut by half. And finally, how it had stung like a slap to be made *personae non grata*—the Jonahs, singled out as the scapegoats for all the group's ills. The whole scenario had made us feel as though we were bits of old furniture cluttering up the place.

At this point I have to make clear that my beef was not being expelled *per se*; there was no desire to 'hang on'. We had already sent a letter to the Committee stating that we'd probably be gone in a year. And two years on, we live in a nicer house, I'm making a buck, life's good and the only thing I miss is the interaction with the stream of visitors (both Subud and non-Subud) we were used to welcoming to the Subud House. No, it's the way it happened that was so shocking, so gut-wrenching, so wounding: virtually the whole group suddenly turning on us overnight, their self-righteousness fuelled by ever-evolving 'testing results'; so-called 'brothers and sisters' becoming as cold as Victorian landowners evicting non-viable tenants.

Although the main protagonists were not present at the meeting (sadly), as I related my story I witnessed in myself a kind of miracle: all my pique evaporated. Suddenly, I didn't really mind any more (a well known phenomenon in therapy and in the South African Reconciliation programmes). I kind of understood why it happened, why they did it, and I sort of forgave. I think this was due simply to being listened to without judgement and taken seriously—my grievances, my hurts, the injustices all being at least *acknowledged* for the first time. And I felt suddenly free of having to pretend I was this mythical Subud member who, after thirty-seven years of latihan, ought to be 'steadfast in adversity', whose heart 'didn't make a fuss'. 63 YVR 4 I am just me, folks—faults, warts and all. 'If you cut me, do I not bleed?'

This is a weird thing. From what people came and said to me after the meeting, I felt that the twenty-plus members in the room had, for that moment, experienced a genuine respect for me despite my open wounds, my admitted inadequacies. Maybe, I concluded, when just one person is publicly open and honest, presenting without pretence, all masks come down and tacit permission is given for others too to openly be as they really are, and perhaps a great relief is experienced.

So, was it time to forgive?[8] I'm still struggling to know exactly what that means. It's defined as 'to stop harbouring feelings of anger and resentment towards (someone)'. I've managed that, but during the following Ramadan, it suddenly occurred to me that forgiving could be seen as an arrogant gesture. It implies moral superiority, 'I am right and you are wrong, and from my lofty height, I pardon you your sins.' Later, watching Mel Gibbs' *The Passion*, I was struck by the fact that Christ on the cross cried, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do!'—not, 'Father, / forgive them....' I also realised that Christ had his moment of anguish, of loss of faith, of despair when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Again, it's okay to express weakness, to show the dark side. It's human, it's real and, as long as you don't stick there too long, it's part of the process of 'coming through'. As Icksan, Bapak's original helper back in the Fifties was wont to say, 'It must out.' To this I would add, 'In its own time frame.'

Was it time to forget?[9] Not that, either—not just yet. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis: 'We cannot move to a good place from a bad place; we have to put right the bad place first. Just as, if an equation is wrong, to get the right answer we have to go back to find and correct the error....'

So, it's thanks to that initial opportunity to express my feelings and to have my wounds at least acknowledged that I am on the royal road of understanding, which I believe eventually leads through surrender to healing. And this is why I welcome and embrace this Internet Seminar initiative.

In the future, I would like to see *subudvision* broadened out into an internationally accepted, wholeheartedly embraced, face-to-face, group therapy-style procedure. I'd like a space to be created where grievances can be aired without fear of judgement; a caring 'holding space' where the smoothest talker doesn't 'win the day', where the pain can't be 'tested away' and hurriedly reburied; a space where people can speak their minds, discuss their feelings and express their anxieties openly, safe in the understanding that painful issues will be acknowledged and not glossed over, or answered by 'Subud-speak'. A place where, if appropriate, a route to healing can be discussed, planned and initiated. A learning space that is as real, as congruent and as purely *susila* as we are able to make it.

A final reminder from Bapak on the meaning of *susila*: 'When an animal looks for food, they do not consider others. If the food already belongs to another animal that they can defeat, they will just take it.... Even though the food is there in front of you, if it isn't yours you won't take it.... That is called *susila*. So when a person knows right and wrong, knows yes and no, knows what is their property and what is not, that is a person with humane qualities....' 66 TJK 2

If we don't create such a forum, if we continue with the current *status quo*, allowing those who have achieved animal level status to 'take our food', we have only ourselves to blame. And of course, reading between Bapak's lines, he also means our spiritual food—our ability to work through our crises, our personal crucifixions, with their consequent suffering, anguish, loss of faith and eventual surrender, in

order for the old self to die and the new to be born.

Echoing the old saw, 'Trust in God, but tether your camel,' Bapak once said, '[P]atience, acceptance and willingness to let go should definitely be directed only to Almighty God, not towards a person. For if your submission is directed towards a person, and that person, as good as they are, still possesses self-interest no greater than a grain of rice, the result will be that you will lose everything you own....' 66 TJK 4.

Again, I don't believe Bapak is referring merely to material possessions, but to our unique, personal journeys as well. He is, to my understanding, simply telling us not to surrender any part of our spiritual experiencing to any one person, group or neurosis-driven belief system, or we 'will lose everything we have'. In reality, the only thing we each own, and can therefore lose, is our personal journey.

We have been warned....

### **Notes:**

1. This teleological mind-set is not a million miles from the Jewish belief that the Messiah will come in the future, but only if you are good now.
2. It could indeed be argued that the current state of the world with all its wars, injustices, and dissembling could reflect my presumption that Subud is in a bad way, thereby perpetuating the myth of 'the world reflects Subud'. But that is for another essay.
3. And if our *per capita* percentage divorce, murder, criminality, failed business, disaffection and mental health rate (just as examples) are no different to the world's, I do wonder sometimes, just exactly what we are offering beyond a nice, lovey-dovey feeling at World Congresses. However, I am not disparaging the latihan, or doubting its efficacy. I have personally benefited enormously from the inner changes I have perceived in myself over my thirty-seven years in Subud. These include the disappearance of my anxiety depression, the growth of a rich and fulfilling family life, an uncovering of latent creativity and insight and experience beyond my wildest dreams. I have documented all of this and more in my book *Saving Grace* (VIA BOOKS 2004).
4. *Stepford Wives*: a 1972 novel by Ira Levin, as well as two movies of the same name, the first released in 1975 (remake released 2004). The premise involves the male inhabitants of the fictional town of Stepford, who all have eager-to-please, overly submissive, and impossibly beautiful wives. The protagonist is Joanna Eberhart, a new arrival to Stepford with her husband and children, keen to start a new life. As time goes on, she becomes increasingly puzzled by the zombie-like Stepford wives, especially when she begins to see her once independent-minded friends turn into mindless, docile, 'perfect' housewives overnight. Read more on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Stepford\\_Wives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stepford_Wives)
5. Testing: I believe this is an area that has got us into a lot of trouble. For the uninitiated, testing is a way of asking Almighty God for guidance, answers being 'received' usually through feelings, movement and/or sound, all of which has then to be interpreted. Despite the fact that Bapak has warned us that our testing is probably only 10% accurate, it is used for making many decisions, individually and as an

Association (especially for choosing officers) and is Subud's main claim to being a theocracy. The big problem with testing, as far as I can see, is that if (or when) it all goes wrong, there is rarely a 'Plan B'.

6. *Nafsu*, translates as desire, passion or ego, depending on context. They manifest whenever an 'ancillary' (Bapak's term for the heart, the mind, or sexual organs etc.) is fuelled by a 'lower force' (material, vegetable, animal or human), as opposed to the ideal of being driven by the *jiwa*, or purified soul. In Subud circles, the term is often used to describe any non-conforming, boat-rocking or outspoken behaviour (such as this essay).

7. I am aware of the work done by Susila Dharma, the charitable/welfare arm of Subud, especially of the aid given in Indonesia after the tsunami. Despite a small membership (both professionals and voluntary workers), Susila Dharma has NGO status with the UN and funds several humanitarian projects worldwide.

8/9. I am intrigued that 'forgive' and 'forget' have the antonyms of 'giving' and 'getting' inbuilt. The *Oxford Etymological Dictionary* indicates that this antonymous quality goes right back through the Dutch (*vergeven* and *vergeten*), Old German (*fargeban* and *firgezzan*) and Old English (*forgiefan* and *forgietan*) derivatives, meaning 'pardon' and 'fail to remember' respectively, but does not explain further or say anything about modern usage and implied meaning.