

Alternative?

by J. Maria Cameron

In response to Subud Vision's recent 'Question of the Moment' [What would Subud be like if we abolished the Helper system? (Subud Vision, June '08)], I proposed a mentoring scheme as a possible replacement and a more egalitarian approach to supporting new members, with the idea of making the system more accessible and clearer in its remit. As a consequence it was suggested I might like to expand on the mentoring idea.

After a number of false starts I realised this off-the-cuff idea was tinkering around the edges rather than addressing what I perceive to be some of the difficulties I have with the organisation. I say 'the difficulties I have' rather than suggesting the problems all lie with the organisation, but I have no doubt my comments may well fit with concerns expressed elsewhere.

The latihan remains a powerful force in my life. I am not sure what it is, where it comes from, or how it works — if it works. Sometimes I think I may just be conning myself or it is no more than a case of self-delusion. Yet despite that, I know I am being blessed, guided, sheltered, challenged, and taught. Why? — absolutely no idea. I cannot begin to make sense of it, but I don't doubt the shape and purpose it has brought to my life even though I might struggle to explain it.

But the organisation of Subud leaves with me with a deep sense of dissatisfaction. It may be that I don't understand or appreciate its ways of working, but to me frustration is the order of the day. The structure and its various elements — helpers, committees, wings, plus all levels of functioning — ideally should foster integration and co-ordination with a true sense of harmony; but do they? The complexity of the system may be considered a necessity in supporting Subud world-wide, but it feels somehow remote from the ordinary member. At group and possibly regional level I feel sure we could adopt a simpler framework which would promote a more inclusive and accepting approach, devoid of status, and a greater willingness to listen to and learn from each other irrespective of how long we have been in Subud and following the latihan. For helpers there is the danger of imposing their own understanding on others or getting too caught up in the role that testing has assigned them, to the detriment of fulfilling the actual tasks of providing support, encouragement and guidance. Hence the notion of mentoring, where any member may be willing to provide support to newcomers and older members too. However after checking the dictionary definition of 'mentor', which emphasises experience and expertise, I had second thoughts. 'Buddy system' might be a more appropriate term.

It is the 'expertise' bit which, for me, gets in the way. If my memory serves correctly, Bapak emphasised the role of *helper* as just that — a Subud member ready to offer assistance, but not necessarily spiritually advanced, not particularly expert, assigned to open new members, to share their own experience while also emphasising the individuality of the latihan experience: a necessary arrangement to promote the latihan and support the membership. So where am I going with this? What I think has crept in over the years is a sense that being tested in as a helper comes with some status and

authority, with an expectation of a progression through the hierarchy — group to region to national to international. Implicit in the process is the assumption that the new helper is ready and fit for the job of attending to the spiritual needs of the membership and only needs time to meet the demands of the role. Perhaps the emphasis should be less on the role and more on the tasks of the helper, even on some training in carrying them out effectively to ensure consistency of approach, along with a list of *dos* and *don'ts*. Consistency — or lack of it — is an issue. Too often with newly appointed helpers at whatever level come new ideas or different approaches with little or no explanation other than 'this is the way we do it now'. I hear you argue that testing is enough and the recipient will grow into and be somehow supported and guided in the helper role. That assumes a capacity to receive well and clearly at all times. Mmm... the sceptic in me wonders. Meantime as the helper is 'growing into the role' and attempting to divine how best to serve the spiritual needs of the 'flock', what about the members? — new ones in particular who may well be utterly confused as to the role and hold unrealistic expectations of helpers, not to mention older members who may be at odds with the style of helper delivery yet feel unable to question or comment.

A simplified buddy system, at group level at least, would offer a clearer remit, limit confusion and be more readily understood and also more immediate in providing support and encouragement. It would also emphasise the non-expert responsibility bit, encouraging (hopefully) a more open dialogue about the best kind of support or help. All regular members could take this on (optional of course); it would not be dependent on just one or two who are specially appointed. Ah, but what about testing in, isn't that important? Is it? Is testing somehow securing God's approval? And how do we ensure 'buddies' are not passing on erroneous ideas? Probably a lot easier to do than trying to rein in a helper, who can too readily point to being tested in (end of argument). But what is erroneous and who decides? What we need is fitness for the job (as agreed by the membership), as well as a real willingness to carry out the responsibilities, along with an element of training to ensure clarity of role and task.

To be fair, most helpers do carry out their responsibilities with a degree of sensitivity, but sometimes there is a failure to appreciate and respond to the concerns of members. A member in real difficulty, spiritually or otherwise, may need more than testing out of a crisis. A more equal set-up like a buddy system could be more responsive, with members themselves deciding who best to approach, who they feel most comfortable opening up to, or who they judge are in the best position to assist. This approach would also allow for a more equitable sharing of the responsibility for looking after members, which would then not be solely reliant on one or two appointees in the group. The helper system suggests exclusivity in supporting new or inexperienced members and consequently may be less responsive.

A further frustration with the organisation is the promotion of the idea that somehow we in Subud are extra special, more spiritually aware, above ordinary mortals even. How arrogant of us. 'You will recognise them by their fruits' (Matthew 7.16). Well our results (fruits) are not good enough. More and more I see 'ordinary mortals' achieving great things for the benefit of humanity, and with that awareness comes a sense of shame as well as frustration. Our record is not so hot — and I am a part of that failing.

My focus has been on helpers rather than committee, mainly because of the lack of clarity over role and remit, but also because central to Subud is the latihan — which we understand as a spiritual pathway to the inner development of our human soul and its

outward expression. Given the helpers' concern with the spiritual aspects of the organisation, this is an area which requires a lot of care and a fundamental acknowledgement of our limited understanding of the nature of spirit. What's needed is, if not a radical change in approach, then at the very least a serious look at the helper system to identify what promotes, what impedes and what needs to be put in place to ensure true spiritual development, allowing Subud to go forward in the world. This will require significant dialogue, not just testing.