

Can We Fix IT?

By Marius Kahan

I'm beginning to wonder if 'Subud Vision' is an oxymoron. I'm not referring to the initiative itself — I think it's fantastic that there is vigorous debate going on, and we are fortunate to have a team of editors with the time, patience and dedication to make Subud Vision happen (I can't even find enough time to read most of the articles). But Subud doesn't have a unified direction. It seems to me (and apparently to many others) that the 'establishment' Subud and the 'visionary' Subud are pulling in different, if not entirely opposite directions. Despite this, with few exceptions, Subud members seem united on one point — that we are 'practitioners of the latihan' and glad of it.

The main points of debate revolve around our identity in the wider world, whether we should advertise Subud, who Bapak is or was, and whether Subud is — or looks like — a religion, or even a cult. Then there are other questions, about how we welcome (or not) people into Subud, how helpers conduct themselves, whether women should wear skirts to latihan, the subtle pressure to observe certain customs, and the relative importance of Bapak's talks. And since I'm writing this, I must think that I have the answers.

For me, a unified Subud requires that the membership agree on some fundamental and consistent principles, by which I mean that they should be clear, unambiguous and not contradict each other. To illustrate my point, I'd like to tackle a handful of controversies that have caught my attention as, for me, they highlight some of the differences between the two main camps. Can we fix it? I don't know, but I think that we may be able to go some way towards squaring the circle.

A topic of particular controversy is the concern that we might be turning into a cult, or at least be perceived as one — indeed, some correspondents even insist on calling Subud a cult. This is a thorny issue, not least because nobody (and I'm talking about the world at large here, not just Subud) seems to be able to agree on what the word 'cult' actually means. What's certain is that it's widely held to be a derogatory term and something that, by any reasonable standards, Subud is not: We don't require our membership to withdraw from 'normal' society or to give away anywhere between a tenth and all of their income, and we don't demand that the membership adopt a rigid belief set (those who do, do so by choice). Cult is a term that inflames people's sentiments and is unhelpful if we're going to have a constructive dialogue about what makes us seem alien to people outside Subud. How about we drop the word 'cult' and simply focus on what makes us appear weird.

And, in my opinion at least, Subud *is* weird; a bunch of people go into a room, sit quietly for a few minutes and then stand up together. One of them may say 'begin' — or not — then they move around and make all manner of odd sounds for about half an hour, and then they stop. That's the core Subud practice. What's not weird about that? Not that it bothers me of course — thirty odd years says I'm fine with it, but honestly, with an exercise as unconventional as that it's going to be next to impossible to shake off the 'weird' label until our numbers are so great that Subud is a (respected) household name.

Part of the attempt to 'de-weird' Subud involves correcting misperceptions by calling time on the habit of peppering Subud literature (and conversation) with Indonesian or Javanese terminology. Some may feel that these terms are used to perpetuate an aura of mystery, as if to put some distance between the 'Subuds' and those, including enquirers, who have not been fully integrated into some mythical inner sanctum. I remember having a sense of that when I first joined Subud; it was quite a while before I realised that a *selamatan* was just a party where alcohol wasn't served if a member of the 'Royal Family' (as a friend used to insist on calling anyone related to Bapak) happened to be present. And while there are those who hold that there is a subtle extra layer of meaning to words such as '*jiwa*' that's missing from 'soul' or 'spirit', I reckon they're probably just playing the mystery card again. And even if I'm wrong, I'm certain that this is how people outside Subud will read it.

Perhaps, for now, the solution is a middle way in which these words would be excised from Subud literature intended to serve as an introduction to Subud. But does anyone have the patience to do a 'find and replace' for '*jiwa*' in all of Bapak's talks, for instance? I hope that in future editions these terms will be replaced with their equivalents in any given language (after all, even Christian fundamentalists don't insist on using the Aramaic for such terms in the Bible), but until then, a practical approach might be to add a preface to all Subud publications along the lines that in Subud's early days in the West, the translators who accompanied Bapak used some Indonesian terms where they weren't clear on the precise words that should be used in other languages, but that there was never an intention to befuddle people. I'm not sure that such a disclaimer would serve any deeper purpose in the long run — but for the moment it might serve as a bridge between two camps and help us to get some clarity on this particular point.

I'd like to think that anyone who turns up to engage in the latihan can personally adopt or reject whatever beliefs and linguistic quirks they choose — as long as they don't make the mistake of thinking that everybody else should share their convictions, or that these things constitute an official party line.

But on the broader question of how the world perceives us, all I can manage is a big 'so what?' The world at large is a nasty place full of negativity and there will always be people who decry Subud no matter how we present ourselves. I absolutely promise you that, no matter how we try to mitigate it, the world is, and will continue to be, full of people who say that we are a cult and try to destroy us — and they are increasing in number. I live in France, and here Subud is considered pernicious, as is Steiner education and even homeopathy. That's the way the world is. There are Christian groups who will never be satisfied unless we officially adopt Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and even if we were to comply with such a demand there would be others insisting that even that was insufficient. From what I hear, we will never get a fair hearing from the Muslim orthodoxy either, and we are even banned by the Bahá'í faith.

So instead of being market driven (spiritually speaking), shouldn't we be thinking of ourselves as market leaders? The latihan *is* something special, but this sometimes seems to have become obscured by a lot of embarrassment about and apologising for Subud. Perhaps the disappointments of the last twenty odd years have gone some way towards expunging the hubris that used to exist (particularly in the Subud 'elite'), but our collective morale is at such a low ebb that many people (myself included, if I'm honest) just can't seem to muster any enthusiasm for the Association as it stands.

How can we stand up and claim to be the shiny-bright future of world spirituality if our outward appearance is still dog-eared, with numbers dwindling and ownership of premises more the exception than the rule? In addition, to these eyes at least, the establishment Subud looks like a strange brew of Javanese mysticism and new-age alternative culture, mixed up with an almost church-like reverence for paradigms drawn from the Abrahamic faiths.

So are we, in fact, a religion? I'm firmly in the 'no' camp, but even if we don't fit the dictionary definition (of which there are many), Joe Public will try to dictate that we are — my non-Subud family members certainly think so. It's a losing battle — but does it really matter? I'm not sure that it does. I'm certainly not suggesting that we accept the tag 'religion', only that for many people of the sort who would even consider joining Subud, that would be the least of their worries. I have come across plenty of people who scorn religion and say that they would never join Subud because they don't 'want to belong to anything'. Protesting that we are not a religion isn't going to make those people sign up.

But if you are in Subud then you do, by definition, belong to something. Is that really such an embarrassment? The trouble is, those who aren't happy with the broad policy of the movement, or the direction in which they see it moving, often end up straddling an uneasy divide (as I do) where they engage with the latihan, but don't feel that they are — or want to be — part of the organisation. If the organisation were to adopt certain resolutions, would those people's feelings about being a member change? I know mine would.

Religions are founded on the teachings and practices laid down by their prophet or Saviour. Subud is founded on the practice of the latihan. Surely that's the central point. But regardless of the claim that there is no formal teaching in Subud, if there are people who desire extra support in the form of Bapak's talks or *Susila Budhi Dharma*, then who are we to deny them that? I haven't heard much complaint about Subud members embracing Islam (apart from occasional comments that it smacks of 'follow the leader'), or about those who read the Bible or go to church, so let's cut some slack for the people who hang on Bapak's every word.

Why don't we just grasp the nettle and say that yes, there is a belief set that Bapak clearly embraced for himself (while often saying that people should not believe what he said unless they experienced it to be true for themselves). Admit that for anyone who's interested, there is an archive of talks that Bapak gave — and that these can be freely explored. In fact why not go the whole hog and have an initiation ceremony for those that want to follow the Bapakian path, as long as it's understood that there is not the slightest obligation to embrace Bapakism and that being a Bapakist is no guarantee of spiritual progress. There must be a traditionalist with sufficient Subudian zeal to formularise this new religion; indeed, at least one Subud member has set himself up as the voice of Subud-The-New-World-Religion-And-Only-Hope-For-Mankind and I'm sure that he would gladly take up the challenge....

Don't worry — I'm not entirely serious; I think that it would be better for Subud to distance itself from such rantings. I would far prefer that no Bapakian way exist, but there's plenty of evidence to suggest that some people feel a need for certainty of the sort found in an official teaching. But given what I understand Subud to be, I would rather that the Bapakists be the ones to form a breakaway faction (if that's the way Subud is heading, as has been suggested) instead of forcing the hand of those who

want to drop the religious, biased and — dare I say it — cult-like aspects that are manifestly contrary to the official line that there is no teaching, dogma or hierarchy in Subud.

I also believe that the Association should have an official disclaimer about any non-authorised source that claims to quote Bapak — by which I mean that Subud should only endorse or recognise quotes that are verifiable — such as those from a recording of the man himself, translated by a linguistic expert of the calibre of a Rofé or Horthy. I know that puts us in authoritarian territory, but if we are going to try to present a rational face to the world, we cannot possibly allow unauthorised ramblings about Subud experiences, particularly those relating to the founder and other purported luminaries, to appear in print as if sanctioned by the Association itself.

I suggest such a strict line because of the recently published story from a guy who claims that Bapak told him that God exchanged his (dull and uninteresting) wife's soul for the (sparkly and wonderful) soul of some chick he met at work and had a crush on. The whole episode sounds like a childish fantasy. Never mind that this is yet another anecdote that marginalises women by characterising them as mere trinkets for men, or that the poor women in question had no say in whether they got to keep the souls originally allocated to them (*come on*, for God's sake!!!) — what Bapak said to this man was translated into English, by an Indonesian, for someone who is Japanese.

I simply cannot believe that Bapak, even at his most way out, would have come up with something so preposterous. However, I could believe that he might suggest that God had *changed* the souls of both women — in the sense of changing their attitudes, so that his girlfriend went off him, and his wife decided that she loved — and forgave — him. Such an explanation still rankles insofar as it perpetuates the myth of male superiority, but at least it stacks up in light of what might be termed 'the Bapak Cosmology'.

I feel saddened that so many people lap up tales like this quite uncritically when what's being claimed simply doesn't stand up to scrutiny. I don't believe that remembering Bapak's birthday or quoting his talks is particularly harmful to Subud's reputation — but I think that crap like this getting published 'in the name of' Subud quite possibly could be, and that any book or article telling a 'Subud story' should, whenever feasible, carry a reminder that the content reflects only the views of its author.

All of which brings me to the question of Bapak's fallibility. It seems almost to be heresy in some circles to suggest that Bapak made mistakes, yet he frequently alluded to the fact that he was just an ordinary man, prone to foibles just like the rest of us, and that making mistakes is part of the human condition. More than once I attended talks in which he said that we could all be 'like Bapak' — presumably meaning 'warts and all'.

On the other hand, there are those who feel that Bapak was an authoritarian who set himself up as a guru, then weakened his credibility by getting everyone to invest their life savings in grand Subud projects when, if he were truly the perfect leader, he should have known full well that they were doomed. Because of this, he needs to be 'dethroned'. The poor guy can't catch a break!

The thing is that Anugraha, for example, failed because mistakes were made, long before Subud even acquired Dell Park. I'm not interested in raking this over — but what is sure is that Bapak was not among those who screwed it up. In fact, had his advice to

buy the property at the outset been followed (instead of turning it down only to buy it some time later at an inflated price and with much less land), we might well have a successful Anugraha even today. And Bapak wasn't actually wrong about there being gold in Kalimantan. He never said it would be easy to extract — quite the reverse in fact — as has proved to be the case. I know that investing in these projects has caused tremendous hardship for some and that, especially in the eighties, it was common practice to act on Bapak's every suggestion — but the membership imposed this guru status on Bapak; he never claimed it for himself.

I'm not being an apologist either, by the way — the Kalimantan initiative may have had some negative consequences for the local environment and indigenous peoples; indeed, one aspect of Bapak's talks that I always found somewhat disturbing was his scarcely disguised contempt for tribal societies of the sort found in rain-forests. In fact he said plenty of things that I would find offensive if I had time to bother being offended, just as there's plenty to offend in the Bible and the Koran. Again, I have to say 'so what' — as long as we don't fall into the trap of automatically endorsing everything that he said.

Rather, I think we should go a stage further by making it official policy to promote aggressively the truth that Bapak was an ordinary man. After all, he kept telling us that, but few seemed to want to believe him. The membership pleaded with him for guidance and he gave it — but that doesn't necessarily mean that he was intentionally authoritarian. Who knows, perhaps he had devised a cunning plan, right from the outset, to be so outrageous and prejudiced that in time it would become impossible to set him up as a prophet.

It's time to dismantle the artificial constructs that have been erected around Bapak — I genuinely believe that he would be disappointed to see this emerging 'cult of Bapak'. Sure, people idolise people — from Obama to Madonna, it seems to be a human trait — but we don't need to dethrone Bapak because he never put himself on a throne. What Subud must do is ensure that we don't idolise Bapak officially, that this tendency doesn't crystallise into part of 'the constitution'.

Let's be reasonable — this man received the latihan, passed it on, made no special claim to be a prophet or guru, spent much of his later life (at an age when I would hope to be sipping tea on the veranda) on a punishing round of international tours as well as making himself available to advise on a variety of matters and, to prove his point about business, started a bank. I know he had help and that, apparently, there were high ranking members of staff on the take, but that's not the point. The point is, ordinary bloke or not, whether driven or guided, he worked his arse off for Subud, got the movement underway and had an eye for expedient choices of cohort — Bennett, Rofé, Vittachi et al. It seems to me that there's an emerging trend to hold Bapak in contempt, but I seriously wonder if his critics could have achieved a fraction as much — all evidence is to the contrary.

Is it really so bad to remember his birthday? Plenty of birthdays are celebrated — we've got Martin Luther King Jr. day, the annual Henry Ford Birthday Celebration and Dinner, Google reminded us recently that it was Igor Stravinsky's birthday, while in the UK you can't escape either of the Queen's birthdays. I don't celebrate Bapak's birthday — I try to avoid even celebrating my own — but what the hell if people do?

What about the offensive things Bapak said though? Well, we're all grown-ups; shouldn't

we be above being bothered by someone else's opinion? As Eleanor Roosevelt famously said, 'No-one can make you feel inferior without your consent' — so I'd like to stray into sensitive territory here because I think it's an important point. What's been quoted about Bapak's views on homosexuality has alienated much of what little gay Subud community there is. But there is no official Subud line on homosexuality and that is how it should remain. However, since the genie's out of the bottle, I'd just like to say that we may live in politically correct times, human rights may be paramount and my charming next door neighbours may be gay (actually, I'm sure they are) — but none of that means that Bapak was right or wrong about whether, spiritually speaking, it's a bad idea to engage in homosexual activity. I don't know the answer, but I've yet to meet the person who can successfully make a decision to override their sexual urges, be they straight, gay or bi.

However, whether his stance was informed by the fact that he was an Indonesian Muslim or whether he was simply stating what he felt was his receiving on the matter, I don't believe that Bapak was remotely in the same ball-park as some skinhead Nazi bigot propping up a bar and spouting hateful prejudices. And I'm also certain that what he said had nothing to do with Subud policy, or even what he thought of gay people. Bapak also counselled against infidelity, divorce and even Buddhism. Where are witch-hunts against those of loose (hetero)sexual morals? In the Eighties and Nineties 'soul-mate' divorces in Subud seemed to be more the rule than the exception. I'm just trying to make the point that Subud is supposed to be tolerant of all people, so rather than defending (or protesting about) Bapak's opinions selectively, I think it would be much fairer — and better for the future of Subud — to stop acting as if Bapak's comments on matters of personal choice constitute policy.

I'm pretty sure that if explicit guidelines for or against gayness were put in place it would polarise the membership, potentially reducing our numbers and ensuring that, depending on the policy adopted, either 'right-wingers' or gay people would stay away in droves. The more people we alienate, the further we are from both a viable association, and from the stated principle that Subud has no rules, teaching or dogma. The appropriate response, surely, when asked if Subud welcomes gay people, is 'Subud welcomes all people — why would we differentiate?'

Gay people in Subud face a dilemma. The pragmatic approach is to accept that they will meet prejudice from some people in Subud, just as they will in the wider world and leave it at that. If that's unacceptable, then they are forced into choosing between giving up (gay) sexual relations (because Subud is more important to them than their sexual identity) and leaving Subud (because the reverse is true). Neither of these seem terribly realistic. Perhaps the answer is to ignore the hard-liners and instead take comfort from the fact that Bapak's actions in life seem to demonstrate that he wasn't passing judgement on people, even if he did on certain behaviours. If he'd really had such a bug up his ass about gays (if you'll forgive the colourful metaphor), Hussein Rofé really wouldn't have got very far in Subud, would he? Yet, as far as I understand it, he lived in a gay relationship for many years, in close proximity to Bapak and with his full knowledge.

Another big controversy is Buddhism. Bapak was pretty hard on Buddhism, yet he always said that people were free to adopt whatever religion they chose — so anti-Buddhism was never a policy. Does it even matter what Bapak thought about Buddhism? As far as existing Subud members, Buddhist or not, are concerned, I don't

think that it should, because as a Subud member one is free to practice whatever religion one chooses: that's what 'no rules, teaching or dogma' is supposed to mean. Bapak's celebrated lieutenant Varindra Vittachi was a Buddhist, remember. So was Bapak merely a pragmatist, using people to promote his agenda no matter what? I don't think so (at least not entirely); rather, I believe that Bapak didn't judge the person, but the religion.

I once heard Bapak describe Buddhism as a shadow faith with a shadow heaven and a shadow hell, and it's probably fair to say that to the average Christian or Muslim, Nirvana sounds somewhat insipid — but since everything that's ever been said about the Hereafter has come from people who were still alive, I'm loathe to give credence to any published description of it. But some of Bapak's talks contain glaring inaccuracies regarding Buddhism. Even as a non-Buddhist, I recognise that these demonstrate extraordinary ignorance about the aims and ideals of Buddhism, mistakenly identifying it with bizarre and extreme ascetic practices and even ascribing philosophies to Buddhism which are diametrically opposed to its actual stated beliefs and goals.

So whether Bapak was right or wrong about Buddhism, his credibility is completely undermined by these assertions and this *does* matter, because not only will it drive potential Buddhist enquirers away (as well as non-Buddhists who know a bit about Buddhism), it will also make Subud appear ridiculous in their eyes — which in turn makes for bad PR. How can we tackle a problem like that with the Subud we have today?

I have to say, as a 'freethinker', my view is that if Subud really is a way for each of us to find our own true path, there's little point even bothering with Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or any of the rest. But I have always had a strong distaste for religion, especially of the Abrahamic variety — and ironically it was the strongly non-religious message I got from the Subud members I met in the Seventies that originally attracted me to the Association.

So, Marius — what's your point? It's simply this. There is no consensus at the moment. Subud is stagnant, and many people have noted an apparent slide towards a religious infrastructure for the movement. How that will develop remains to be seen. But can it really be that difficult — given that we actually do manage to do latihan together most of the time — to find a solution that we can all live with?

I suggest that Subud, as a body, adopt a new policy resolution, one that has been voted on by every Subud member who chooses to do so. Living as we do in a connected world, this is something that can be achieved more easily than ever before. A questionnaire could be devised and made available online to all Subud members, and for those without internet access, paper copies could be distributed by connected group members to ensure that everybody's voice could be heard. The idea would be to vote for or against a series of simple statements intended to describe what Subud is. It would be preferable, if there are people willing to manage this, for the initiative to be preceded by a consultation period in which members could submit their own statements for consideration.

The sort of statements I have in mind would include assertions such as: 'Subud has no official teaching, no leader, and no rules' and 'No special status, such as guru or prophet, is to be conferred on Pak Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo, the founder of

Subud. This is in accordance with his wishes' — and each one would have check boxes for 'agree' and 'disagree'.

I would also like to see options presented for revising some Subud-specific words, giving members the opportunity to vote for or against terms such as 'jiwa', 'nafsu', 'applicant', 'helper' and so on. An alternative would be presented, and a further, optional field could be provided for respondents to suggest a word that they would prefer to be used.

One word I have a particular problem with is 'helper'. A more inappropriate term for some of the people entrusted with 'helper' duties would be hard to find. I have met many self-important and pompous individuals with nothing more to offer 'regular' members than an encyclopaedic knowledge of Bapak's talks, patronising advice about fasting and the ability to tell when thirty minutes (and not a second more or less) has elapsed. For these people, as well as a handful of candidate helpers I have come across, being a helper represents some sort of badge of honour — despite Bapak's insistence that it carries no special merit. Add to that the flawed mythologies that have been known to circulate, such as helpers getting a special, more intense latihan or supplementary angels, and you have a recipe for bull-headed arrogance. I genuinely believe that 'janitor' would be a better term. It would remind 'helpers' that their principle function is to make sure that the latihan starts and ends, and to listen and offer support if people have questions. This revised nomenclature could go a long way to cutting a particular kind of helper down to size (I am a 'janitor' by the way, although a terribly modest one, of course).

Naturally, the questionnaire needs to be made available in the local language of any country where Subud is active, and a great deal of careful thought needs to be given to the questions asked; for example they should not be leading, nor appear partisan if at all possible. I suggest that those resolutions which poll a high percentage of 'yes' votes be carried (I'm thinking in terms of 90-95%), while the rest should simply be ditched. Such a high percentage is important because it would be a strong indicator of consensus, while ensuring that people with a wildly different view from the majority could not derail the process, as could happen if 100% agreement were required.

This way, we could present a united Subud to the world. I recognise that Bapak may well be accorded a more authoritarian status in some regions than others — so would the 'progressives' (of which I think I'm one) be comfortable with the results if this poll carried a motion powerfully at odds with their personal sentiments?

For me the answer is an emphatic yes; it would clarify my own position with regard to a large majority of the membership (we're talking of at least 90% after all), and I would be in a well-informed position should I subsequently choose to disassociate myself fully from the Subud organisation (as against the latihan). Simply put, I would know, at root, whether or not Subud is what I think it is.

I suggest that the World Subud Council and Subud Vision open up a dialogue to thrash out the statements that would drive this initiative.

In conclusion then, I find myself asking whether we can find a way to rediscover our pride in Subud — to develop a little collective self-esteem so that we can go forth and multiply. If that's going to happen, a radical overhaul is in order, and part of that is to resolve the apparent identity crisis we are currently facing. A world Subud consensus

could be an excellent first step in bringing Subud 'to order'. It would show, once and for all, whether there is common ground and if there is, we would have a mandate to review and update how we present the opportunity to receive 'The Latihan As We Know It' to the world.

In other words, the time to start marketing Subud may be at hand, but it requires what I might crassly refer to as re-branding. The world has changed since Subud hit the West, yet like an ageing hippie in pony-tail and paisley shirt who refuses to move out of the Sixties, Subud seems to be out of step with the times — and unless that changes we will not easily attract new members. Any number of movements, entertainment franchises and hotel chains have re-branded to great effect, and the time seems right for Subud to do the same.

When I say 're-branding' I'm not suggesting that we misrepresent Subud — I'm suggesting that we find out exactly what we think we are, then tell the world about it. And we have to do that in a modern idiom if we're going to reach people — not to do so would be like producing the latest hydrogen-powered car using the body of a 1950s Beetle. We shouldn't let our mouths write a cheque that our bodies can't cash, but by the same token if we've got the light, let's ditch the bushel.

Scientology and TM (Transcendental Meditation), for example (and I'm not a fan of either) have updated themselves and, to anyone unaware of the way they appeared to operate in the past, look far more attractive than their former incarnations. Even 'Star Trek' (bear with me on this) recently presented a slick new face in the cinema with a film that was bang up-to-date and light years away from the clunky Sixties TV show. And that's the point: I might, in a nostalgic way, enjoy watching William Shatner beaming down to papier-mâché sets and having punch-ups with Klingons, but to anyone under the age of about 103 it just looks cheesy. So, I fear, does Subud.