

Making claims

By Marius Kahan

Final attempt. Pretence of scholarliness dropped, objectivity discarded. This time I'll just tell it as I see it—subjective and opinionated maybe, but hopefully with something to contribute to the whole.

I don't like Subud. If it wasn't for the Latihan, I wouldn't be a member. I liked Subud when I was opened back in the mid-Seventies, but over the years both Subud and I have changed and I don't like it anymore. Please don't misunderstand me though; the gratitude I feel for this gift, the miracle that is the Latihan, is beyond words. However, my impression of the Subud organisation itself is just about as far removed as it could possibly be from the sense of wonder I have with regard to the Latihan.

Various factors contribute to my disappointment in the brotherhood but I don't find the issue overwhelmingly bothersome. I'm certainly not losing any sleep over it and I do recognise that the Subud Association is probably the most accessible way for people to receive this contact. It's just that, to my eyes, a remarkable opportunity is being missed.

Back when I was an applicant, the sentiment most often expressed was that Subud members were on the receiving end of a miracle—that Subud was the trailblazer of a spiritual revolution which would sweep the world, uniting all religions and ushering in a new era of harmony. The common ingredient in almost everybody I met was enthusiasm. Today, that enthusiasm seems to have all but evaporated and many people seem resigned to the idea that Subud is a niche movement and is likely to remain so. Of late I can't remember when I last heard someone enthuse about Subud. But Subud is a veritable new-born in the pantheon of spiritual movements, and fifty years is but a blip in the scheme of things.

Also prevalent among people I met in those early days was a view that the core benefit of Subud was spiritual progress through direct contact with the power of God, whatever one believed that God to be: Allah, Jehovah, the Great Life Force or something else altogether. As such, teaching and dogma were absent not because they were undesirable, but because they simply weren't required. Likewise, Subud was non-evangelical because it was accepted that—as a gift from God—it would spread and develop according to the intention of a power far higher than us.

Nevertheless, these days talk often turns to What Went Wrong (and it's not lost on me that I'm doing exactly that right now). The topic carries with it an implicit acceptance that something actually has gone wrong, and that Subud has failed to grow as a result. One factor commonly blamed for our lack of progress is the failure of some grand project, usually Anugraha. But, even though any business which fails does so as a result of mundane and quantifiable acts played out in the material sphere, Anugraha is often held to have left a psychological wound that has crippled the brotherhood.

Fortunately, not everybody sees it that way. There are other members keen to cut through the disillusionment and jump-start the movement, and one aspect of this is a drive to give Subud greater visibility in the world. Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing, but given that "to every thing there is a season" I wonder if, as we're still very young, we should bide our time and let momentum develop naturally rather than using our will to push things forward.

If not, we need to give careful consideration to what we present to the world. Whether it is intentional or the result of heedlessness, it appears to me that a particular flavour of Subud is being put forward which I believe misrepresents the brotherhood and goes to the root of my assertion that if we're going to promote Subud, we need to do it correctly.

I was particularly concerned by the introductory leaflet, still widely available, that appeared a few years ago from the UK National Office: "The latihan—a way to *deeper spiritual understanding*" (their italics, not mine). This publication is the thin end of a subtly biased wedge.

I could spend quite some time dissecting this booklet, but for the sake of brevity I'll focus on a handful of points, starting with the cover. This consists of white text against a blue-tinted background of passing clouds, an image that makes it look like a refugee publication from a born-again church. I know that some people find this handout quite lovely, but the fact that quite a few people don't means that it's inappropriate. Any 'brand statement' applied to Subud cannot help but be flawed since everybody's experience of the Latihan is, apparently, unique. As such it's vital that the message be completely neutral.

The cover also carries that disturbingly partisan claim of superiority: "a way to *DEEPER spiritual understanding*". This is simply out of place, and invites the question, "Deeper than what?" In any case, for many, it is no such thing. It *might*, for some, be a way to *deeper spiritual understanding* (why is that italicised?) but it might equally be a way to disenchantment, divorce, illness, career disaster, mental health issues, poverty—or better marital relations, improved health, wealth and spiritual insight. What it *is*, is a way to connect with—as far as I can tell—a higher spiritual power, and it carries absolutely no guarantee. If anything the cover should read: "The Latihan—a way." Incidentally, I prefer to capitalise the 'L' because it has become the name of what we practise.

There's bad grammar too. Inside, the text states that [the Latihan] "is a way for people to receive *the* deep spiritual experiences *similar to those* referred to by prophets of the great religions." It should read either "to receive *the* deep spiritual experiences referred to by prophets of the great religions" or "to receive deep spiritual experiences *similar to those* referred to by prophets of the great religions". Before you accuse me of nitpicking, there are an awful lot of people out there for whom bad grammar is off-putting. That it wasn't proof-read by someone with better literary skills smacks of amateurishness.

But in any event, the assertion itself is again out of place—as stated above, there is no guarantee. I certainly don't assume that my experiences are in any way comparable to those of Jesus or Mohammed, and I would be more than a

little surprised if anyone in Subud had claimed to have attained such lofty heights. It's absolutely deceitful to pretend otherwise.

Then we read that, over time, it brings "emotional and physical well-being, clarity of purpose and deep understanding". Huh? For some people it may do, but for many it brings disruption and an end to the stability they may previously have enjoyed, albeit, perhaps, in a state of ignorant bliss. Ironically, for me it is has—to a large extent—lived up to this claim (and I count myself as extremely fortunate), but I think it's important to state that, in common with many other members, my road to inner quiet has been via the town of Adversity and the truck stops of Divorce, Penury and Illness—not to mention the rehab clinic of Prihatin.

I could go on—each page is replete with rose-tinted references to the benefits of Subud and the whole speaks of a desire to see Subud as some kind of panacea—simply plug in to The Force and the mists will clear, life will become carefree and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.... It fails to ring true and it doesn't take a complete sceptic to see that.

If such a publication had found its way into my hands before I knew what the Latihan had to offer, I imagine that I would have walked away. My sentiments were compounded by some feedback in the Subud Journal stating that it was good that something had been produced which could show the world what our beliefs are. Our beliefs? I thought that the whole point of Subud was that we don't have any.

I get the impression that there is an intention to align Subud with post-modern, politically-correct thinking. But surely, trying to match Subud to the Zeitgeist is to allow it to be driven by the prevailing culture, whereas—if the Latihan really does offer something unique to each member—Subud should be neutral and free from outer influence.

This would appear to contrast with efforts to define Subud culture as something apart through the vehicle of SICA. This 'wing' falls into the trap of supposing that there is something different—special even—about creativity in Subud. But Bapak himself said that we don't have a monopoly on God, and he also pointed out that culture comes from God—so there's no reason to suppose that our creative output is any better than anyone else's. Indeed, for me—and a number of other artistic types with whom I've discussed the issue—SICA is, on the whole, pretty insipid. I'll probably get accusations of elitism for this, but while there is some good stuff out there in SICA-land, there's also plenty of mediocrity and it seems to be accorded equal importance. Of course we don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but (sticking with music, which is what I know) until Subud produces something truly spectacular—a Stravinsky, a Chick Corea, a Maria Callas or a Dizzy Gillespie—perhaps we should be a little more discreet. My suggestion would be to scrap SICA and let Subud artists get on with it. True artists will out anyway, and those who aren't cut out for a life in the arts would no longer need to soldier on in delusion.

Instead of ascribing characteristics to Subud and promoting outlandish claims in materials intended for general consumption, wouldn't it be better to

recognise that our sole common thread is the fact of having received contact with the Latihan? The lack of a Subud doctrine—which was a large part of what I found so attractive thirty years ago—has been supplanted by a saccharine and unrealistic representation of the association.

As an applicant, the literature I saw was plain and refreshingly non-partisan. I was encouraged, not put off, by helpers who told me that, while I might experience a whirlwind ride, I might equally receive something very subtle; that my values might change and that my journey could, potentially, involve patience, soul-searching and even difficulty. The very lack of sugar-coated promise was a plus, but more to the point, members shared experiences of their own which demonstrated that this was a process in which commitment and honesty with oneself paid dividends.

Joining Subud is the start of a personal journey that is entirely between the individual and whatever-they-believe-God-to-be. If we present potential applicants with anything other than a blank canvas, we remove their chance to experience the Latihan unfettered by preconceptions. At best this will impose limitations before they begin; at worst it risks driving them away. By extension, we could be missing an opportunity for Subud to grow.