

Keeping Track of Reality

by Merin Nielsen

Again and again I hear it said that Pak Subuh is the 'Spiritual Guide' of Subud. Funny: it's not stated in the WSA constitution. And when people join Subud, they are not required to see any person as Subud's Spiritual Guide. If it was the case, you'd think it would be mentioned in the Wikipedia article about Subud, but nope! And I've been practising latihan with apparently real personal benefit for decades while viewing nobody as the Spiritual Guide of Subud (or of me). I realize that lots of Subud helpers do insist on referring to Pak Subuh that way — but hey, the *dewans* can be seen as simply a kind of 'devotee club' that also lacks any official recognition. So, it seems to be no more than an idea that some people like to believe. Subud has no Spiritual Guide.

Seen from another standpoint, Pak Subuh was not 'holy' in any way. He was just a bloke who had strengths and weaknesses, like anyone. He was apparently expert at *silat* when younger, and was trained in the arts of a *dukun*. He was fond of big cigars and *kreteks* till he started getting older. It appeared to most observers that he carried himself quite charismatically, especially in the presence of numerous admirers — which is not surprising, as revered individuals are frequently endowed with 'allure' through the social atmosphere of adoration around them. Pak Subuh does seem to have had a strong connection with the latihan state. Nonetheless, seen from this angle, his accounts of an ascension and other 'spiritual' developments were no doubt selectively embellished and exaggerated, while, similarly, the experiences themselves were obviously interpreted by him in line with his Sufi-*kebatinan* mystical background. A person having much the same experiences as he did, but coming from a disparate cultural perspective, would in all likelihood provide an account which sounds completely different. So, while Pak Subuh's great familiarity with the latihan state probably gave him a relatively clear picture of both its prospects and limitations, this doesn't mean he ever had it totally 'figured out'. (For those interested, '*silat*', '*dukun*', '*kretek*', and '*kebatinan*' each have entries in Wikipedia.)

From this point of view he may have been remarkable, but he was never any more than an essentially normal person who simply had a well-developed flair for a certain psycho-physiological state which appears at times to be powerful and potentially somewhat beneficial. It's a state that is apparently acknowledged among various traditions, under various interpretations. Pak Subuh espoused a new form of engaging with that state, namely, the exercise of entering and deliberately sustaining it, in a concentrated dose, for thirty minutes twice a week. Meanwhile, coming from a culture that still maintains traditional affiliations with mysticism for its social cohesion, he had an understandable propensity to aggrandise himself, all the more as others aggrandised him. But he had no divine mandate, and will have no major or even long-term historical significance. Painting Pak Subuh in this light may be regarded as derogatory, but only by those who have already put him on a pedestal, attributing status to him beyond other 'merely remarkable' individuals. Yet this picture isn't at all derogatory to someone who initially views Pak Subuh as a person like any other.

Still, many who encountered Pak Subuh had immediate experiences of something 'really and truly there', something special and apart from everyday reality. Anecdotally, the same goes for reading or listening to Pak Subuh's talks. Epiphanies in abundance. Virtually all long-term practitioners of the latihan constantly affirm how it affords proof of something spiritual outside the mundane. Moreover, throughout the ages, mystics, meditators and subjects of 'divine madness' have testified to experiencing realms beyond the physical world. At the same time, there are many approaches toward interpreting such experiences, all more or less useful in various ways. It would seem that their applicability largely depends on social surroundings — not just intellectually,

but subliminally. This factor is so significant, in my view, that the intrinsic nature of our inner experiences is profoundly affected by what our socially-acquired mental maps of reality — particularly of our own spiritual realities — are 'primed' to be receptive to.

For a metaphorical comparison, consider an Australian Aboriginal who's an expert at, say, tracking animals through the bush. You can learn it from her, but will probably never be as good as someone who has acquired the skill from childhood in a culture that focuses on it. Still, over the months and years you'll get reasonably competent. In the meantime you continue to be amazed at the ability of this individual. And when she talks, you listen. When you listen, she feels a responsibility to explain things the best way she can, reciprocating the honour to her culture that you demonstrate in being interested. The more reverently you respond to her, the more she relates to you in solemn tones, steadily letting you in on more intimate aspects of her culture, which you soak up attentively, even though they totally cease being related to actual tracking.

In addition, much of 'what works' when tracking is usefully envisaged in terms of Dreamtime stories. That is, the 'reason why' some technique happens to work is often primarily presented in terms of 'fictitious' beings, relationships and events. In the Aboriginal culture, their fictitious nature is taken on board without batting an eye, but as you are not from that culture, you transpose these narratives very poorly to the context of your 'modern', more intellectually oriented culture. You watch in awe as the tracking techniques produce effects resembling magic to the average Westerner, while hearing corresponding accounts of the Dreamtime. Before long, what with the ongoing reverence and solemnity, you begin to suppose there must be substance to them in some non-fictitious way. You soon get caught up in a false aura of mystique or sense of glamour that you yourself have generated and bestowed on the Aboriginal culture. Once you start to see tracking as validating all those Dreamtime stories, you fail to see that the stories were meant only to facilitate tracking.

Perhaps this 'constructing of reality' is just how a human mind naturally works. The process possibly starts in infancy from noting what to do in order to satisfy this or that need. Then we map each useful 'pathway', thus building up a mental map of reality. And of course we are our own map-makers, but not in isolation; we do it in conjunction with the map-making that goes on among other people immediately around us, from whom we learn new possibilities and with whom we constantly interact. Maybe 99% of this map-making process is subliminal. Even when it involves words, there has to be an underlying social or collective appreciation of what any concept ultimately 'points to', which cannot possibly be reviewed consciously moment-to-moment. I doubt that anyone's map of reality is principally grounded in the physical substance of the world. More likely our maps are fluidly constituted on the basis of myriad, subliminally witnessed pathways toward resolving our respective fundamental biological and emotional needs. If valid, this view would have significant implications in psychology and sociology.

For the last ten years or so, cognitive scientists have been exploring a certain model of conscious perception often known as the 'predictive brain' model. In my opinion it's largely on the right track, though it calls for lots of ongoing research and development. With this approach, perceiving is very much tied in with the brain predicting what is there — even when 'there' refers to internal experiences. Logically, furthermore, what the brain tends to predict, in terms of some experience in any known context, is closely tied to what it has previously interpreted as being relevant in that same context. In this view, attention gets directed to any sensation in the first place only because of some expectation of relevance to the whole person's current situation. Since the brain is always therefore making a kind of prediction at the same time as querying the crucial data-content of any sensation, it automatically somewhat limits the parameters of that experience.

It begins in early childhood. As we become 'responsibly socialized', reality gets more and more encoded for us in words, morals and ideals — the human-proprietary 'shortcut' method of mapping reality. Given the necessity of this verbalization process, the notorious loss of innocence seems unavoidable. Most people get through it without too much distress (as otherwise we'd have no functioning societies) and readily adopt their respective quasi-natural, social world-views without obvious inner tension. For others, 'fitting in' may be spiritually or existentially uncomfortable. Most of us seem to locate an adequate source of solace in, say, a religion or ideology, while others feel obliged to look further afield. But perhaps all we can reasonably do, assuming we've become sufficiently stable as enculturated adults, is to some extent smooth over the inevitable side-effects of having been perforce assimilated into the socio-cultural collective.

We all self-observe. It's fundamental to every spiritual tradition and path, and so we notice things happening inside ourselves, but it's pretty aimless until we accept some purpose in interpreting or picturing these things. Any purpose is bound to mesh with whatever we've been told about the inner life, which depends on the tradition or path that we happen to have connected with, either culturally or through 'spiritual seeking'. This amounts to adopting some 'scheme' of understanding which will naturally encourage self-observation as spiritually healthy, and offer a starting point for selecting what inner processes to focus on. Once we've got some picture of what could be going on inside us, we can use it to look for and attend to specific sensations.

As a result, though, this background picture also delineates the things we tend to notice. It influences both how we pay attention to the relevant sensations and how they're interpreted. We anticipate noticing certain things going on inside us, and of course these are useful to observe according to the scheme that we are relying on, but the interpretive picture leads us to focus specifically on particular sensations in a predetermined manner. Since we naturally expect them to correspond with the overall scheme of understanding, this is liable to deeply affect how they appear if and when we sense them. If this is the case, it could help to explain how humanity has ended up with so many firmly supported, all apparently beneficial, yet clearly diverse accounts of 'spiritual' reality.

Introspection is arguably a form of art. Like any art form, it takes its motivation from the cultural milieu and reflects the social influences giving rise to it. Introspection creatively explores interpretations of the integral relationships that the artist encounters, but less in terms of the outer world than the inner one, with its 'hidden' layers of socio-linguistic psychology, archetypal imagery, physiology, neurotransmitters and other biochemistry. This amounts to an often confusing inner landscape, and of course we look for descriptions to help navigate our way through it. In this regard, many sorts of map are more or less useful, largely depending on the cultural pictures that have been built into our own private landscape. Hence, any person who claims to have skills for navigating this inner world, and offers some supposedly useful description, tends to be readily welcomed by those feeling a little lost. Whatever the guide's own personal background though, he or she is really just one of us — another inner backpacker with a possible knack for tracking.