

The Good Reputation of Subud

By Rikard Seeberg Andresen

In 2000 ISC chairman Pak Muninjaya appointed a sub-committee for the protection of the good reputation of Subud. Their mandate was to investigate the possibility of monitoring all visual material dealing with Subud produced by Subud members. The background for this move was that two young members had made a rather fanciful video presentation of Subud that deviated a lot from the “official” ones. The committee, consisting of three long-term members from Canada, the USA and Australia, arrived at this conclusion:

Well, we decided to simply adopt the most obvious and natural course of having members with long experience in the latihan, and the love of, and respect for, Bapak and the brother/sisterhood he founded, review in stages any material to be produced in the name of Subud, whether for members or for the general public.

...In establishing a resolution and guidelines, we are very cognizant of the fact that a new organisational body could be viewed as increasing the Subud bureaucracy. To avoid that, we suggest that two members be chosen in each zone—and though the term ‘International Review Team’ is used, the fact is that we envisage only a loose association between the various pairs of reviewers. They would be local members, virtually without a title, but with a responsibility to negotiate, and, if necessary, to advise.

To most of us, freedom of speech and expression is nothing less than a human right, a right that is often violated by repressive regimes. Hundreds of journalists are killed every year because they reveal secrets or criticise the political establishment. Varindra Vittachi, first chairman of WSA, took a great risk with his articles in the international magazine *Index on Censorship*. That was of course quite another and far more serious matter, but I have a feeling that Varindra would not have supported the Media Review proposal. A comparison with the media censors of the Roman Catholic church is less far-fetched, though. Until recently no paper on matters of the church could be published unless it bore the stamp ‘nihil obstat’ (“no objection”) from the censors. The media reviewers of the Roman Catholic church emerged after the invention of printing. They still exist, but in the media world of today not even bishops bother to consult them. This is simply common sense when anybody can publish anything on the Internet.

Subud is indeed full of experienced and devoted long-time members, to the extent that it is difficult for new and less experienced people to voice their opinion at all. This lack of balance may lead to frustration and perhaps to protest actions like anti-Subud web sites and the like. No Media Review Team could possibly prevent such flare-ups. Attempts at controlling information will have only one effect, namely, to reveal our wish and futile determination to control information, a sure mark of a cult.

“Subud is you,” said Bapak. Very true, and therefore we are all interested in protecting the good reputation of Subud. The million dollar question is how we best can do this. The new WSA Chair, Daniel Cheifetz, knew the value of free and open communication, and no more was heard about the Media Review Team. But the urge to control information has not disappeared; it is still going strong among devoted lovers of Bapak and of the brother/sisterhood he founded, who seem to regard all criticism as sacrilege. This attitude is another aspect of the cult image and a hindrance to the growth of Subud.

There is certainly no lack of information about Subud. More than two hundred books are available, among them fifteen volumes of Bapak's talks, and a search at Google gave 75,000 hits. The problem is that the information is not objective. Most Subud web sites do not publish critical or balanced articles, while anti-Subud sites describe Subud as a dangerous and repressive cult. If this is the diagnosis, the remedy would be a completely free flow of information. It is no use preaching freedom and limitless growth of the inner self as long as everybody can see the shackles. What then is the nature of these mental shackles?

It would be wrong to associate them with certain persons or institutions; we are all responsible. Some of the explanation may be found in the structure of the local group, but is also relevant for committees and permanent workshops. If I am asked about my home town or my views on politics I will usually feel free to speak my heart, but not if I am asked about Subud. Then I will be cautious about my choice of words. The reason is that in this case I do not represent myself only; I represent Subud, and have to be careful not to say anything that could be contradicted by the helpers or other members of the group at a later stage. The person asking will sense this uncertainty and probably drop the subject.

Of course I do not have the right attitude; it is not necessary to test in order to know that. A more interesting question is why this is so. Part of the answer may be found in group psychology, which is dominated by what has been called animal forces. In all societies, animal or human, there is a constant struggle for dominance. This is the main reason why organisations split up into factions that may develop into cults.

Bapak tried to neutralise these forces by creating an organisation where offices and positions were split up and changed every fourth year. This rotation principle works well in a large and expanding organisation, but not in small groups with little fresh blood. Over the years everyone has had all offices and positions and no-one is willing to take orders from anyone. A balance of power arises where all members have a share that corresponds to his or her social status in the group.

In these circumstances new members represent a threat to the balance. As in the fairy-tale, the newcomer has three choices: accept the whole packet of written and unwritten rules and expectations, question it, or leave Subud. Most newcomers choose the third alternative, and we cannot blame them for that.

There are three different traditions in Subud, and Bapak represented them all. For convenience I shall call them the *guru*, the *scriptural*, and the *Sufi* traditions.

'Guru' is originally a Sanskrit word that means teacher. In his book, *Susila Budhi Dharma: SUBUD. International Mystic Movement of Indonesia*, Clairmont University, 1974, Dr. Pangarisan P. Sitompul describes a certain type of '*latihan kejiwaan*' that seems to have been a common village practice in Java: Groups of forty to fifty people of both sexes, sometimes the entire hamlet, exercise, sing and dance until they get tired. Now is the time to sit down and listen to the guru, who will usually give a talk about spiritual matters.

The Sumarah movement, which was founded in 1935 in Yogyakarta by a close friend and fellow seeker of Bapak's, Sukinohartono, has a latihan that, besides being less noisy than the Subud latihan and therefore more adaptable to modern city life, is controlled and led by a guru. This may be the main reason why they have nearly ten times as many members in Indonesia than Subud. The local groups are more autonomous than in Subud, and each group is led by a *pamong* or group leader. Many Subud members would also like to have a spiritual guide, and this is perhaps the main reason why Ibu Rahayu started giving talks and answering questions from

members. After Bapak's death many members felt the need for a live authority to show the way, in spite of Bapak's clear message that he would have no successor. Quite the contrary, he expressed the wish that we would all become more like himself, i.e. stand on our own feet and follow our own inner feeling.

Ibu Rahayu is also very clear about her own role. She regards herself as an elder sister and not as a replacement for her father. In later years she has repeatedly urged people to trust their own receiving rather than ask her advice, while on the other hand she advises all members to look to Bapak's talks for guidance.

The scriptural tradition is well known in both Eastern and Western cultures. For fundamentalist Christians and Muslims, the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an occupy, respectively, the same position. Their contents are considered to be the Word of God, absolute truth that can not be doubted or altered. Some Subud members seem to regard Bapak's talks and writings in the same way. Consequently, quotations from Bapak's talks can be found everywhere in Subud publications. The problem is that these quotations often contradict each other and it becomes necessary to pile them up in order to win by points.

It is obvious that neither WSA nor Ibu Rahayu believe that Bapak's talks will bring new people to Subud, but quite the contrary. In March 2007 they informed all national committees and Subud webmasters that the following disclaimer should be placed at the beginning of every talk by Bapak or Ibu Rahayu: "This talk was given to people who practice the spiritual exercise known as the Subud Latihan. For those not practising this exercise, reading the following talk is not recommended as it could be misunderstood." ISC explains that this disclaimer is necessary because many people who are not opened have been upset by reading the talks.

The third alternative is the Sufi or mystical tradition. The message to the disciple is always the same: the real teacher is within you. The guru cannot teach you anything about spiritual matters. This message may sound very simple, but how can the disciple get in contact with this inner teacher? Not by reading, and not by following rules or ascetic practices, but only by total surrender to God, or rather to an omnipotent, transcendental life force that has no name, as all mystical experience is beyond human understanding and cannot be expressed in words.

If we believe that the mystical experience is the core of Subud, following the advice of other people will lead nowhere; it could even block the way to inner awareness and understanding. Therefore it is no use having people wait three months to be opened while stuffing them with explanations, talks and all kinds of ideas and expectations. As I see it, this practice has done far more harm to Subud than it has helped people in any way. Frustrated expectations probably rank high among the factors that make newly opened people leave Subud.

This rules out the two first alternatives as a way of promoting Subud, and we are left with the third alternative, the mystical experience. I believe this approach has a wide appeal to people of today, especially in the Western world where an increasing number of people are fed up with all kinds of authorities. It would be a hard test for us in Subud to lay aside all quotations and explanations, but if we could revive the spirit of '57, the year Subud came to the West, when everyone who asked was opened almost on the spot and the explanations came later, new people might feel the vibrations and join Subud. All questions about the past, present and future of Subud are closely related and linked to the initial vibration that started it all. The vibration is still there, but has not made us strong enough to tackle the outer world. Subud has not conquered the world. In many respects the opposite has taken place and made us behave as if we were a multinational company and our reputation depended on monitoring and efficient control routines.

What then is the best policy? We could perhaps listen to the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's words of wisdom:

"Compulsion only leads to hell
While to Heaven, toll the bell."