

Will the Real Bapak Please Stand Up

by Rosalind Priestley

Which of the following statements do you think best defines who Bapak was?

- 1) Bapak was spiritually on the very highest level, comparable to Christ or Mohammed, and could be considered a Messenger of God, possibly even a Prophet.
- 2) Bapak was a wise and charismatic spiritual leader.
- 3) Bapak is Subud's guru.
- 4) Bapak was a powerful channel for the latihan.
- 5) Bapak was an ordinary, quite fallible, human being.
- 6) Some, all or none of the above.

Who was Bapak? Probably an impossible question to answer. All the same, I think it's worth exploring.

Let's look at the top of the list. To say that Bapak should be honoured as a Prophet or as the founder of a new religion is surely a statement that cannot stand unchallenged. Bapak himself was quite definite about Subud not being a religion. Nevertheless there are hints here and there in the Talks that he was indeed someone spiritually very exalted. But how would you assess such a claim? So far in human history, one important criterion has been success: a great prophet or teacher is associated with a widely practised religion. For example, there were hundreds of small sects in existence at the time of Christ, but their leaders' names have not survived. Subud, compared to other spiritual movements, is small and insignificant and lacks momentum for growth. It's possible that one day Subud will be widely known and valued, and at that point Bapak will have the credit of being Subud's founder, but at present calling him a new Prophet seems premature at best.

Success is not the only qualification. Prophets have been associated with new teachings that advance human understanding and moral consciousness: the Ten Commandments, the Koran, the Gospels. Religions and spiritual movements outside the Abrahamic tradition also have had their great Teachers. Was Bapak such a one? Some Subud members would strongly affirm that he was, but are there original and profound insights to be found in his Talks? No one has ever done a thorough study of Bapak's thought, but it's pretty clear that his understanding owes much to his Sufi training and Javanese background. He himself did not claim to be a teacher at all, and stressed that it's the latihan that is the teacher.

But even if a spiritual leader has a following of millions and a powerful new message, it's still a big leap to say that he has a mission from God. The Abrahamic tradition has it that God from time to time sends prophets or messengers to steer mankind back onto the right path, but many of us would no longer accept that model unquestioningly.

So ultimately this is something for the individual to decide, but we should

recognize that outside the Subud world such a claim is likely to be met with a lot of skepticism.

Regarding Bapak's status as a charismatic leader, many of us feel that here we are on firmer ground. We believe we know who Bapak was. We've had our own experiences perhaps, and we've read and heard what others say about him. Many people have found deep personal significance in his words and experienced his presence as a catalyst for personal change. Some have even had powerful experiences that cross into the supernatural realm. But how much of all this derives from the man, Bapak, and how much of it grows naturally out of the guru-disciple relationship?

We know that when mystics have visions or experiences, their content usually relates to the mystic's own belief system, e.g. a devout Christian might have a vision of Jesus, or Mary, or receive the stigmata. When you become the disciple of a spiritual teacher, it opens the door for a powerful influence, but this influence is not just shaped by the teacher but also by your own psyche, your own inner culture, and your own desire for spiritual Truth and guidance. In this way the experience becomes personal, not something alien or imposed – which makes it all the more compelling for the individual involved, but not necessarily meaningful or relevant to anyone else.

If we look at other spiritual movements, clearly Subud is not the only one whose leader has inspired dreams, visions, and moments of profound insight and recognition. The world seems to be full of spiritual teachers or gurus who are adored by their followers and are a focus for psychic phenomena of all kinds.

Subud members in general have chosen to accept Bapak as a teacher and guide. But if it were not for the connection with the latihan, those of us who were actually seeking a guru might well have chosen a different one. In a world full of spiritual teachers, how does anyone go about choosing between them? My impression is that many of them claim (or are claimed by their followers) to be at a very high spiritual level. But there are no objective tests you can apply: again, it has to be a personal decision.

It should be noted that in many religions and spiritual traditions there is a deep suspicion of psychic phenomena, as there is also in Subud to some extent. It is difficult to tell the difference between 'receiving' and imagination. There are temptations for the ego. The personal element can contaminate and distort the spiritual essence, as can also happen in dreams, or in testing – as we know.

However, because of their experiences of Bapak, some members have felt and still feel a very strong connection with him, and rank him high as a spiritual leader. And one cannot argue with their reasons. My question is: what weight should the experiences of some have for others who have had no such experiences? Should these experiences be used to exert a gentle pressure on those who do not feel a connection with Bapak, who do not recognize his high status?

Another factor in the guru-disciple relationship is the deep need some people have for a guide or father figure, someone who will provide protection, reassurance and approval, and give their lives direction and meaning. It may be that the majority of Subud members have such a need. But others, those who have a need to be *free* of authority figures, may feel left out in the cold in a group where deference to a guru is the norm.

But, apart from the guru-disciple relationship, what was Bapak the man like? Was

he an exemplary human being or was he flawed as so many other teachers and spiritual leaders have proven to be? On the one hand, there are the personal testaments you read in the Subud media, the beginnings of a Subud 'hagiography'. But there also exists an unofficial history, not much talked about, in which Bapak figures as a more ordinary human being. Anecdotes have been circulated that give an impression very different from what is usually published. According to them, Bapak's behaviour was not always selfless and loving. He could be high-handed and judgmental, especially to perceived rivals. He seems to have had, to some degree, the prejudices of his culture and age: sexism, homophobia, racism – which we might have expected a great spiritual leader to rise above. He could be self-indulgent (the limo, the expensive suits), and he seemed to expect deference from his followers. The stories showing him in a less favourable light were excused in the adulatory climate of Cilandak (and the patriarchal culture of Indonesia) but they might have provoked a different reaction if they had spread to the wider Subud world. However, after so much time, no one can be sure how much truth there is in these anecdotes or how representative they are.

In the Talks, Bapak sometimes made elementary mistakes about the beliefs and details of other religions, and even his own religion, Islam. How did that happen if he was speaking from a direct connection with God? Clearly, for at least some of the time, Bapak seems to have been addressing us as an ordinary man with ordinary human limitations. Perhaps there is nothing in his Talks which could or should be considered divinely inspired; perhaps even the best parts are simply the result of his own natural capacity and his early spiritual training. Or, on the other hand, maybe the divine inspiration is always there but it reveals itself in a general attitude or atmosphere rather than in details of fact. But the reader should at least be warned not to take everything Bapak said at face value.

A related question: the concepts set out in the Talks often appear to be derived from Bapak's Sufi and Javanese backgrounds. If Bapak was influenced by his own culture in the ordinary way that we all are, then his explanations are to be taken with a grain of salt. But if the similarities are just co-incidental and Bapak was actually receiving his explanations from a Divine source, then we might have to entertain the disconcerting idea that God intended through Bapak to endorse some of the retrogressive attitudes and superstitions found in traditional Javanese culture.

If, as many concede, Bapak was in some ways an ordinary man with ordinary flaws, then we have to ask: is it possible to be a human being and a superhuman being at one and the same time? Clearly Bapak was in some sense, as he himself frequently reminded us, an ordinary human being. Whether he was also a man unique in his time, chosen by God, is a question that we can only decide individually for ourselves. As mentioned previously, the paranormal experiences his presence triggered in some members may be in part the product of the guru-disciple relationship and the power of charisma. But another possibility is that he was simply in himself a huge vehicle – or channel, or conductor – for latihan energy, and that being near him boosted the power and intensity of our own latihan, with the resultant visions, dreams and epiphanies, and, occasionally, mental breakdowns.

Which leads to an important distinction. Spiritual power or energy does not necessarily entail saintliness or virtue. Spirituality is a morally neutral concept; it is not equivalent to goodness – as we can see in both Christianity and Islam, where Satan is a spiritual being, a fallen angel. When setting up our heroes and saints, we tend to look beyond spiritual evidence, such as charisma and psychic phenomena, to someone whose life serves as a model for other human beings, someone who has

high ideals and lives up to them, someone who is willing to make sacrifices for the greater good.

When many of us were opened, forty-plus years ago, the emphasis was not on Bapak but the latihan. People believed that the latihan had the potential to transform the world; where it came from was not so important. When the effects of the latihan fell short of our expectations, Bapak's authority was used to prop up belief. It was a kind of circular reasoning: we know Bapak was important because he brought us the latihan; we know the latihan is important because of what Bapak said about it. Now that Bapak is gone, his stature and significance are being further elevated in books and in his daughter's talks.

When in a group there is a widespread belief in the spiritual power of a guru, this puts pressure on the hold-outs to conform. It becomes a matter of faith. In Subud, it is faith in the latihan combined with faith in Bapak. And where there is faith, we have something very much like a cult or religion, with extreme protectiveness around the belief structure. However, if, as we claim, we are *not* a religion, it is important to see that views about the latihan and about Bapak are not necessarily linked, and that it is still up to each person to make the call for him- or herself regarding the significance of the latihan and the status of Bapak. There is no reason why there shouldn't be a wide variety of opinion about both: ranging from those who attend latihan because they think it's God's preferred way of being worshipped at this time, to those who simply find it a pleasant experience; from those who treasure Bapak's words and use them as a guide for their lives, to those who are not drawn to Bapak in any way. Such a divergence of views may be difficult to encompass in one organization but if we're not a cult and are wary of becoming one, it should in theory be possible to encourage the necessary breadth and flexibility. If we want to grow and to attract people outside the narrow reach of Subud culture and beliefs, it's essential.

For some members, perhaps, we are already a de facto religion. But if we admit that and behave accordingly, it's hard to see how we can attract new members. And what tends to be the present modus operandi, i.e. claiming to have no guru or beliefs while gradually indoctrinating new members, is dishonest and, frankly, a bit scary. Some applicants are attracted to Subud precisely because of our claim not to have any teaching or guru, but, not surprisingly, they usually don't hang around for long after the opening.

An organization centered on a guru of course has its advantages. The guru provides a strong focus for members' idealism and their hopes of a better world. To the extent that he is generally accepted, he provides leadership. His presence unites his followers in the closeness of shared goals and beliefs in a kind of almost feudal loyalty.

But the disadvantages are equally obvious: the pressure to believe one thing rather than another; the tendency to stay immature and child-like; diminished control over one's own choices; dependency rather than self-reliance; conformity rather than creativity; and above all, a general loss of freedom to be oneself and to think for oneself.

As long as Subud believes in freedom of belief, that must include the right to believe whatever one likes about Bapak: from God's Messenger to ordinary Indonesian gentleman and everything in between. The difficulty arises when the beliefs of some are assumed to be the beliefs of all, or to be the official beliefs of the Subud organization. This has a crippling effect on individual freedom. Even if there is no official policy, if certain beliefs are so widespread as to be accepted as

a norm, the freedom to differ is inhibited, even silenced, unless a space is deliberately created for minority views.

Once again, Bapak's status will always be a matter for individuals to decide. But when making that decision perhaps we could give a little more thought to certain assumptions that are often made. Some that particularly need to be questioned are:

- That psychic phenomena indicate a spiritually high soul.
- That experiences involving Bapak are necessarily significant for those who didn't have them.
- That the latihan and Bapak are linked together and can only be evaluated together.
- That it's wrong to circulate stories about Bapak that might be considered overly critical, but okay to look at his character and his life through rose-coloured glasses.

Bapak is no longer with us, and those who knew him best rarely talk about Bapak the man, only Bapak the great Spiritual Guide. It is a pity, because with a more balanced, honest and credible picture of who he was, we could work towards a more balanced, honest and credible organization.