

The 50/50 Rule

By Sahlan Diver

Chapter One: Saying No

Another World Congress. Another “international entertainment” evening. The announcer tries to raise our enthusiasm by telling us, “We have twenty-five acts for you tonight!” People look at their watches. Not an auspicious start.

The first on, a singer-guitarist, starts well but then outstays his welcome with what seems like another twenty-seven verses. Next, a lady dances with expertise and gusto to a prerecorded sound track to which she adds castanets. The band on the tape keep up with her wonderfully well and the pre-recorded crowd cheer her cadenzas with great enthusiasm. The scratchy sound track adds a quaintness—one feels as if transported into the café scene out of a 1930's melodrama.

No-one can understand the comedy act, which starts with some discussion about a banana and is perhaps too parochial for an international audience. People are leaving in droves. I am sitting next to a lively girl from the mid-USA, a little bundle of fun. The temptation to be witty is too much. As one man literally sprints for the door I remark, “Does he know something we don't?” Next on, a young alto-saxophonist, playing Coltrane. He has beautiful, fine tone. My sexy neighbour leaps up off her seat shouting, “Yes !” Funny, isn't it, how when a musician is good, he only needs to play one note for you to know it. Unfortunately he hasn't practised the “fast freak-out bit” in the middle and I feel him losing the audience. Some people even start to titter, which is grossly unfair. A young singer with a nice voice gets personal with a song about a rock star who changed his name and then left Subud. “Where are you now?” she repeatedly intones. I yearn for him to jump up from the audience, saying, “No sweat! I'm back doing the latihan.”

And so it went on....

Did I enjoy the show? It was an experience! Could I have enjoyed it? Certainly! Most acts were good. Good amateurs usually start well but if allowed to go on too long, as some of these were, they invariably betray their lack of experience and technique, so that the performance palls. But then we favour marathons in Subud, don't we? Look at the way we organise our committee meetings.

Twenty years earlier, two others and I were charged with organising an important anniversary celebration for Bapak. A request came up to include a certain poetry act. Thinking that it was “not very Subud” to say no, I said yes, even though I had never heard the poet. What we got was a (very) well-endowed lady in an (even more very) low-cut dress, leaning over the microphone and breathing a husky love poem directly at Bapak, with the immortal punchline, “I am a woman. You are a man!” The next act was, if you can believe it, more inappropriate; at which point Sjarif got out of his seat to say that Bapak was leaving early the next day and felt that the rest of the concert was for ourselves. What should have been a celebration had become a disaster. That experience gave me a very valuable lesson.

Back to the World Congress. It's the evening after the “international entertainment” and I am up on stage. Now it's my turn for the chopping-block! I have organised an entertainment, resolving to keep the show short but sweet, restricting each act to two pieces, and hoping the audience will leave wanting more. At the last minute, with the Centre staff wanting to open the doors and the sound man pressing for balances, the cast tell me there is a new performer backstage telling everyone how he is going to

be part of the show. I feel responsible to the audience, and to the musicians who have devoted rehearsal time over three days to get it right. I have learnt the lesson of twenty years ago. I say no. The performer says, "Don't give me any of that sh___," and walks off. (I remember Bapak testing how the various races get angry. The Americans walk away. The British remain rooted to the spot, go red in the face and feel self-important.)

The show goes ahead, exactly as planned. My strategy pays off, with the audience demanding two encores. After the show I am discussing the dispute with the excellent American sound engineer. He is not in Subud, but is obviously a person who thinks with some depth and compassion. He complains about a Subud poet who recited at a family show a poem full of sexual innuendo. "You people call yourselves a spiritual movement. You've gotta realise that sort of thing just ain't acceptable. Why wasn't that act vetted? You know, I don't need people to tell me they're on this level, or on that level. I can tell from their behaviour where they're at!"

Chapter Two: The 50/50 Rule

Some months later, I was describing the concert incident at lunchtime during another Subud congress. I can still visualise a dozen disapproving faces turned towards me. Why disapproving? Because I'd broken something called the Subud "50/50 rule". Let me explain.

Bapak was fond of saying in his talks that there was no one person who was completely right in any situation. If taken literally, such a statement would be "Subudspeak", i.e. presumptuous nonsense. Suppose someone, at random and totally unprovoked, takes a gun and shoots someone else dead; are we going to say that the dead person shares part of the blame? Of course not! However, it is unlikely that Bapak was talking literally. It is more likely he was advising us to take a step back in any discussion, to first listen to and consider the other side with an open mind and with open feelings, before coming to a conclusion.

Unfortunately, this statement of Bapak's has been distorted by Subud members into a way of thinking which I call the "50/50 rule": *In any wrong situation between Subud members, both sides of the dispute are equally to blame.*

Back to the dinner table discussion about that concert. The Subud members disapproved of my conduct because I had broken the 50/50 rule. Since there was a dispute and it involved Subud members, I had to share half of the blame; therefore I had acted wrongly by not seeking a compromise. Never mind that I had not seen the performer in my life before, that I had no idea whether he was a good or lousy performer, that inclusion might spoil the show for the others who had worked hard to get it right, and especially never mind that the performer was apparently a professional who would never dare behave like that with a non-Subud producer. Interestingly, there was only one person present at the table who fully understood the necessity to be firm in that situation. She was not in Subud, just a guest who happened to be there for lunch.

I could give many examples of the 50/50 rule, but will give just one more. I once queried an expenditure item in a treasurer's report and in reply was told that I should write to my friends around the world asking them what my character flaw was that led to my asking such a question. Although this response was, to say the least, extraordinary, what was significant was the difficulty of finding any Subud member interested in correcting the situation. The 50/50 rule again. It wasn't possible that the treasurer had behaved arrogantly—I must be 50% responsible and therefore we just had to sort it out between us. I did get this dispute resolved, but no credit to Subud, since Subud proved itself incapable. I went to my solicitor instead and threatened

legal action. Next day, my original question was satisfactorily answered.

Where I believe the 50/50 rule to be particularly damaging to Subud is in situations like the above, where a member has been treated badly and has a justifiable complaint. Some will immediately say, "But we already have a process for resolving disputes. We bring the two parties together and they test." This is the insidiousness of the 50/50 rule—an automatic presumption of partial guilt on both sides. In cases where it is obvious that the person complained against has made a mistake, a simple acknowledgment and an apology is all that is required to resolve the matter. In such circumstances it can be insulting, even extremely upsetting, to suggest that the aggrieved member should take part in a testing session. The dispute may even escalate as a result. Testing should be reserved for the disputes where there is no easy resolution or where the disputing parties themselves suggest they are willing to test.

In conclusion, here is some advice for members about dispute resolution:

- 1) In Subud, disputes happen.
- 2) One party may be wholly to blame, or there may be varying proportions of blame to either side. Avoid automatically applying the 50/50 rule. Try to understand the reality of the situation complained about.
- 3) If someone has been badly treated they may get a little angry. Or even very angry. Don't become a victim of the commonplace Subud fallacy that anger = lower forces = a sign that the person is in the wrong and therefore should be ignored.
- 4) If a complaint from a member goes unresolved, don't automatically assume, if you hear no more about it, that the complainant is satisfied or has "calmed down". They may quietly add the incident to their subconscious list of dissatisfactions with Subud, which, one day, could cause them to drop out altogether.