

In Subud, We Have No Beliefs

By Sahlan Diver

It's usual for applicants to be told that they are not required to believe anything in order to join Subud and practise the latihan. Although this is true, it is not the same as saying that Subud has no belief system.

This article sets out to describe as many Subud beliefs as the author can identify (*ninety*, but there are probably more). They are listed at the end of the article. The reader should understand that the purpose of this article is not to criticise all the beliefs — the author himself happens to hold to several of the listed beliefs quite strongly — however, where the source of a belief, or the consequences of holding that belief, is open to question, a comment has been added. The purpose is to suggest that, like it or not, we do actually have Subud beliefs, many of which have been inseparably connected to the conduct of Subud in the past and will probably continue to determine Subud's fate in the future.

Subud is not a religion. It has no official holy book, no religious commandments, no requirement for extensive study of the life of its prophet. That's why it is possible for members who are Christians, Muslims, and so on, to feel no contradiction between their faith and the practice of the latihan. On the other hand, the advice about spiritual right and wrong in *Susila Budhi Dharma*, the many exhortations to read Bapak's talks, the enthusiasm for reminiscence about the life and times of Bapak, and our commonly accepted ideas about the spiritual, all form a kind of de facto informal substitute for the familiar religious elements of holy book, instruction, veneration and belief system.

Should the reader doubt that the beliefs listed below are Subud beliefs, I ask them to apply these two tests:

1) Consider how many of the beliefs were familiar or of particular interest to you before joining Subud. My guesstimate is that, for most of you, many of the concepts, originating as they do in Bapak's very foreign Javanese culture, would have either been entirely unfamiliar or of no prior special interest.

2) Imagine you are at a party of Subud people and your conversation includes the beliefs below. How easy or difficult would that feel? Now imagine the same, but at a party of non-Subud people. If Subud had no belief system, there should really be no difference between the Subud and non-Subud party situations.

No doubt because of the authority of Bapak, many Subud beliefs have been taken on-board uncritically. To take just one example, it is very common in testing sessions to test about the 'lower forces'. I was involved in one such session last year, with questions like 'In these difficult times of economic recession, how should I be in relation to the material force ... in relation to the vegetable force ...,' and so on. When do you ever hear a member say, 'Hold on a minute! I'm not interested in Javanese cosmology. You're testing about these forces as if they really exist, but you should realise it's just an ancient way of looking at the spiritual, something to keep the mind engaged. There aren't *really* any such forces — it's just a metaphor; we might just as well test: "How should I be in relation to the little green man in my water closet?"' Suppose that member was a Catholic, how many non-Catholic Christians would be comfortable with his suggesting, as an alternative test: 'How would the "Mother of God" have us be?' It's easy to tolerate a belief system when its origin is exotic and far away. No worries. But bring the beliefs closer to home, that's when realisation dawns and we might start to feel uncomfortable: 'Yes, this is a belief that I

am being asked to adopt, but do I agree that it represents a spiritual reality?’

The list of beliefs is a long one, but they were not difficult to find. A quarter of the listed beliefs were easily identified, another quarter came from suggestions supplied by my fellow *Subud Vision* editors, and almost half came from trawling through this year’s and last year’s helper reports, congress advertisements and other recently published Subud material.

Take any collection of people, their sayings and writings, and it would not be difficult to collect beliefs. What makes beliefs into something more than a random sample, is that, taken together, they have an internal consistency and logic. For example, let’s start with someone who believes that there is one God, and that this God sends prophets. A second person comes along and says, ‘God has been sending prophets and it hasn’t worked, mankind is still in a mess, so now God has sent the latihan.’ Others may disagree with both these people, but there is nothing ridiculous or inconsistent about those beliefs. Then a third person, says, ‘Yes, and if God is sending something entirely new, he’s clearly not going to leave it to chance; he’s going to send someone with special spiritual powers to ensure that this new thing takes root and develops.’ Again, you might not agree with the belief but there is nothing ridiculous about it, it is quite a reasonable statement, and it fits consistently with the other statements. Then a fourth person says that if the sent person (i.e. Bapak) was specially inspired by God, obviously what he tells us about spiritual matters is going to be inspired, and therefore should not be taken lightly. Again you might not agree with the interpretation, but what we have is a belief system which is logical and consistent in a spiritual sense and that goes all the way from the power of God through to Bapak being sent with a special message. Beliefs that add to and follow from each other in this way become more compelling by the way the big picture into which they fit hangs together.

A common riposte to the suggestion that Subud has a belief system is, ‘So what? I’m not that bothered about most of it; why should you be? It’s optional. You don’t have to believe it.’ But, as John Elwyn Kimber pointed out in a recent *Subud Vision* article, the word ‘optional’ implies there are options, such as the option to follow an alternative belief system, or to actively reject or even oppose the prevailing belief system. An alternative belief system for Subud I heard suggested recently was that the latihan was a particular manifestation of the ‘ideomotor effect’, which we would later come to understand through scientific research, and that Bapak gave the practice a spiritual meaning because of his personal long-term interest in things spiritual, as described in his autobiography. What was questioned was not the value of doing the latihan, simply the belief that it had a ‘power of God’ origin. Suppose the proposer of this idea announced: ‘I think we should drop the current belief system, abandon the Subud symbol representing the seven levels, and adopt the more modest approach that we don’t know what the latihan is but we just believe it to be worth doing’, how likely is it that Subud would consider adopting an explanation of the latihan which does away with the whole unprovable spiritual and religious context? Not likely at all. Proof sufficient that we are holding on to a favoured belief system in Subud.

Some might say that the Subud belief system merely represents the majority beliefs of its membership. This begs the question whether the members really do hold the beliefs or whether they just go along with them because that’s what seems to be expected in Subud. Even if the majority do share a common belief system, what is our justification for promoting that belief system while at the same time claiming you don’t have to believe anything? Wouldn’t it be better to live up to our claims of being ‘belief-neutral’ by purging any officially favoured view?

Notes:

- a) I have tried to stick to fundamental beliefs. It was suggested that I add beliefs like 'banana fasting will get you a husband,' but although such beliefs were well known in the past, such as in the 1970s, they are not really in currency nowadays, neither do they ever seem to have been fundamental to Subud.
- b) The order the beliefs are listed in should not be taken to imply an order of importance.
- c) There is no suggestion that all of the listed beliefs are exclusive to Subud. A belief can still be a 'Subud belief' if it is commonly held by our members as a consequence of their joining Subud, or is strongly promoted by the organisation, either directly through our communications media, or indirectly through recommendation of publications such as Bapak's Talks.
- d) The listed beliefs do not have systematically added comments. Comments appear where felt necessary to provide clarification or evidence, or to promote thought.
- e) This article is not pretending to be a rigorous academic study backed up by many references. The author asks the reader to consider, in the light of their own experience, whether the list is a fair and reasonable one.

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Beliefs about Guidance:

1) *There is a higher power of whom we can ask questions.*

Testing. We can ask in our native language and get guidance in our feelings, which will give us answers that will be deeper and more reliable than anything we can achieve through normal debate, discussion and the exercise of judgement based on experience. Testing is a practice instituted by Bapak.

2) *It is essential that all major Subud decisions should be tested.*

All important matters relating to collective action in Subud must be referred to and decided by testing, since the answers will be more right and beneficial than anything that the mind alone can attain. Subud will thus benefit from the advantage that testing

gives. In particular the big decisions, choosing WSA, ISC, national and group chairs, where the next World Congress is held, etc. should always be tested.

The dominant belief in testing as a reliable, collective problem-solving process, will mean that regardless of how much an issue is researched and discussed, and regardless of a majority vote, any such deliberations can be summarily overridden by testing results.

3) *The One Almighty God is involved in the minutiae of our lives.*

The test 'What would God would have me know or do at this time' is considered to be an entirely acceptable test.

4) *The latihan will guide each individual to their true religion.*

5) *Bapak is still working on our behalf.*

Religious Beliefs:

6) *There is (definitely) a God.*

In Subud writings there is often a strong insinuation that, although we welcome new members who don't believe in God, they will eventually through the latihan come to find the evidence of God's existence.

7) *There is one God.*

Quote from Ibu Rahayu's recent World Congress talk: 'This is possible because God is one.'

8) *Hinduism and Buddhism are seriously misguided religions.*

See Bapak's Talks where he compares these religions unfavourably with Christianity and Islam.

9) *Doing the latihan regularly is equivalent to worshipping God with sincerity, patience, and diligence.*

10) *Subud must be acceptable to all religions, no question.*

If they can't accept it, that is their mistake.

J.G. Bennett: '[B]ecause of Subud's belief in Dharma, there can be no contradiction between this belief and the beliefs of any other religions.'

Beliefs That Almighty God Is Specially Looking After Subud:

11) *The latihan and Bapak were sent by God to bring salvation especially adapted for our modern age.*

The latihan originated at this time because right now humanity needs something like it to provide direct evidence of God.

Bapak's talks hint that maybe God will send no more prophets and that the latihan is

a last chance for mankind.

12) *Subud is God's work, not man's.*

An extension of the idea that the latihan is specially sent. If God has sent it, surely he intends to guarantee its success.

A great dampener against change for the better in Subud. 'So you think you know better than God?' is a put-down that can easily be used to ridicule anyone who suggests that Subud needs major revision.

However, it's clear that Bapak himself did not hold to the common Subud belief in the ultimate success of Subud. (Quote: 'Maybe the progress of Subud will be limited to Bapak's own lifetime.') He wanted Subud members to take full responsibility for ensuring Subud's survival and growth after his death.

13) *It is God who leads people to Subud.*

Subud deliberately does not advertise. It is therefore very difficult to find. Often people come to it through a tortuous route of coincidences. In members' minds, it might easily seem as if God was specially leading or favouring them along such a tortuous path.

Once you start imagining that God is specially involved, it's but a small step to say that no other route to Subud, e.g. advertising, is legitimate. Suppose Subud had been advertised on TV since the 1950s. It would seem quite normal for people to turn up wanting to be opened, but because we ourselves have allowed the path to remain obscure, it seems especially remarkable when people do find it.

14) *The people that Subud needs will be guided to it.*

Statement of Bapak to Bennett and to others involved in the development of Subud.

Beliefs about the True Spiritual Reality:

15) *There's an afterlife and the latihan helps us in the afterlife as much as in this life.*

16) *The latihan as a spiritual developmental exercise gives real results, compared to other esoteric systems.*

17) *There are 7 forces, material, vegetable, animal, human etc.*

That Subud members believe in the existence of these is indicated by the willingness to ask questions like: 'How am I affected by *the* material force....'

Also, the Subud symbol, which Bapak claimed was a 'received' symbol, embodies this belief.

18) *Humans occupy a superior place, particularly civilised humans.*

19) *Mankind is increasingly dominated by the satanic forces.*

From Bapak's talks. A study of history might incline to an opposite view. Go back just 150 years to Victorian times and look at the injustices of rich against poor, or the racist exploitation of Empires. Go back to medieval times and look at the cruel and

unjust punishments for even the most minor of offences.

20) *We should all be seeking to determine God's will for us so that we can follow it.*

The corollary is that Almighty God would have us 'be' a certain way, as in the ubiquitous 'how would Almighty God have me be' test.

Many people would question the idea that God has a preconceived fixed right path for each of us to follow.

Comment from a Subud member: 'I happened to watch the New Zealand Congress "Subud TV". In the answers members gave to questions about Subud, it was striking that they all hoped to become aware of the "Will of God".'

21) *Changing your name can influence your character.*

The significance of names in Subud has its origin in Javanese beliefs. But the practice of name-changing can also be found in several religions.

See: <http://www.ukdp.co.uk/name-change-religious-conversion/>

22) *God changes the weather for Subud events, Bapak and Ibu's travels etc.*

From stories told by Bapak. (He was in Japan, wanted it cooler, and the next day it snowed; he was in England, it should have been raining, but the angels were saying that Bapak was there so it should be fine, so there was a battle of the 'weather angels', leading to alternate rain and sunshine.)

23) *There is an ideal way of life loosely described by the phrase 'right living according to God's will made possible by the power within us all'.*

'We can test what it is to be Susila Budhi Dharma.' (Recent helpers' report)

'What is the heart of a man possessing the qualities of Susila Budhi and Dharma?' (Another recent helpers' report)

24) *The latihan is a manifestation of a force which exists and which is known as the Great Life Force.*

25) *The latihan comes from Almighty God.*

Ibu Rahayu: '.... feel for yourself and recall feelings of bliss etc you've had in Subud. These could only have come from Almighty God.'

26) *We have a soul or 'Inner I'.*

27) *Subud reflects the state of the world and the current state of the world reflects the state of Subud.*

Well-known talk by Varindra Vittachi.

Beliefs about Purification and Ancestors:

28) *It is good to hold the 3 day, 100 day and 1000 day selamatan for the dead.*

29) *We carry impurities acquired from our own lives as well as the lives of our ancestors.*

30) *Third (or further) generation 'Subud children' will be especially blessed in terms of character.*

It was easy to believe this in the '70s, anticipating a golden future. But what is noticeable now is the unwillingness of the older, 'less pure' generations to hand over the reins of power to their golden descendants — much better to keep them out, amusing them with jungle treks and youth camps.

- 31) *We all need purification in this life.*
- 32) *Purification may take the form of illness.*
- 33) *Latihan helps with purification.*
- 34) *Through our latihan we purify our ancestors.*
- 35) *Purification is through the male line.*
- 36) *The daughter-in-law's latihan purifies the mother-in-law.*

Beliefs about Sex:

- 37) *The soul of an individual is only half a soul. Through marriage the two halves become one soul.*
- 38) *Sexual relations outside of marriage bring spiritual impurities that can damage one's spiritual development.*
- 39) *Menstruation is a spiritual purification and therefore women should not do latihan at that time.*
- 40) *Homosexual activity harms the soul.*
- 41) *The more children a woman has, the more spiritual she is.*
- 42) *Male children bring spirituality, female bring material wealth.*

Beliefs about the Latihan Practice:

- 43) *The latihan is an example of God's grace working in your life.*
- 44) *Most people do not have the strength or will to make spiritual change without help. That is why the latihan is so invaluable.*
- 45) *We get the answer more reliably when we test in a group.*
- 46) *'Body testing' improves the strength and effectiveness of our latihan.*
- 47) *The latihan causes people to throw off impurities like dust.*

Therefore young children and babies should not be brought into the latihan room until this 'dust' has settled.

48) *Special latihans can be of benefit to the sick.*

49) *Meditation cannot result in true spiritual progress.*

50) *Although the latihan is not a scientifically-measurable, physical force, it nevertheless needs a large surface area of free air in which to travel.*

We don't feel happy about non-latihaners being in the same room as the latihan, in case they are opened. However if they are separated from the latihan by walls, doors and glazed windows, then, even though they might be able to hear the sound of the latihan we are usually not concerned that they will be opened in those circumstances. Doors do not have to be hermetically sealed. If there is no draught excluder, or no key in the keyhole, it doesn't worry us that some of the latihan might filter through the air gap, causing a person standing near the door to be opened.

51) *Latihan halls can be purified of previous influences by doing special latihans in them.*

Similarly, houses can be purified of past dwellers; some houses or latihan venues can be eliminated as 'spiritually unsuitable' through testing.

52) *The latihan can be effective at a distance, if done simultaneously.*

World Latihans. Isolated members latihanng at the same time as their group latihans. And so on.

Beliefs about How Subud Members Should and Shouldn't Behave:

53) *Publicity that goes beyond information is automatically propaganda.*

This dictum has had a big influence on Subud members' attitude to advertising — causing an irrational fear and nervousness of any kind of advertising of Subud.

Bapak's ideas about advertising are crudely simplistic and clichéd, and pander to popular ideas about advertisers just being liars.

54) *It's best not to use the mind too much.*

When some members imply that 'mind is *nafsu*', they are showing a gross misunderstanding of Bapak's talks. What the talks actually say is that the heart and mind are tools to be used for this life, not shunned, but the heart and mind can come under the influence of the lower forces, so what is important is that the lower forces should be in their right place, not that we should cut down on using the mind.

The mind has many functions, not the least of which are the imaginative and critical functions. Typically a Subud member who wants to avoid 'using the mind' turns off the critical function only. The imagination is thereby given full rein. Unchecked and without the critical faculties in play, any kind of nonsense can be accepted as a 'true receiving'.

55) *We shouldn't give assistance to people going through a rough time without first testing whether it is right, because their suffering may be God's will.*

56) *We should have faith in Bapak's enterprises.*

It was commonly believed in the 1970s and 1980s that if we showed our faith in Bapak and Subud by investing money in the big enterprises, then ultimately we would be rewarded. There are still some members who say enterprises failed because we lacked the right attitude. The lesson we should have learnt is that the sincere faith and right attitude of many individual Subud investors could nevertheless be betrayed by the insufficient expertise and sometimes by the dishonesty of the minority entrusted to manage the enterprises on our behalf.

We have learnt the folly of our blind faith that God would guarantee the success of Bapak's enterprises. What will it take to make us realise the folly of our blind faith that God will guarantee the success of Subud? Probably, just like the enterprises, only complete collapse, by which time it will be too late.

57) *Harmony in Subud is a necessity for growth.*

58) *Harmony in Subud means everyone agreeing to think the same.*

'Harmony' means many different voices singing together. Everyone singing the same note is 'unison'. Unison is what cults demand.

Comment from a member: 'Singing off the same song sheet' is often quoted positively at my group during helper meetings.'

59) *The structure of the Subud organisation needs to be maintained exactly as Bapak arranged it.*

60) *Subud aligns with a religious attitude rather than an irreligious attitude to life.*

It is not a religion but it is nevertheless religious.

Bennett: Those who have a religious discipline will benefit more from the latihan than those who don't.

61) *Subud and the latihan are synonymous.*

In Bapak and Ibu Rahayu's talks, Subud and the latihan are talked about as if inseparably linked.

Beliefs about People:

62) *We pick things up from other people.*

'Poison gas' as Varindra called it. In the early days, Subud members were always imagining they were picking things up (getting a headache from the *nafsu* in the city, and so on). It was thought to be a sign of spiritual sensitivity. A suggested alternative explanation is that other people's neuroses trigger (or resonate with) our own.

63) *Everyone has a true talent.*

Talent testing was instituted by Bapak. Members are willing to have the path of their lives determined by testing, which may or may not be accurate.

64) *Women shouldn't wear trousers in latihan.*

Bapak's advice: Wearing trousers in latihan makes you more manly. 'How come it

hasn't worked on my husband?' — to quote an old joke.

Beliefs about Bapak's Talks:

65) *Bapak 'tuned in' to his audiences and gave them the talk they needed.*

66) *The content of Bapak's talks is divinely inspired.*

67) *Listening to the Indonesian versions of Bapak's talks is better for your jiwa.*

68) *Bapak's words contain the power of God. If you change them you change the content.*

69) *Reading or listening to Bapak's talks while in a receptive, non-mental state is spiritually very beneficial.*

70) *Bapak's talks offer the prospect of a huge boost to the spiritual development of Subud members.*

Quote from Ibu Rahayu: 'Bapak's talks are still very important and very valuable. In Pamulang they listen to a Bapak talk then do latihan afterwards. The quality of the latihan are very different then.'

71) *Bapak's talks explain facets of spiritual development that are liable to arise for latihan practitioners in the long term.*

We are unequipped to understand these explanations until we have reached the respective level of spiritual development.

72) *Bapak is not a teacher.*

But he taught us that if we have a true teacher we will continue to learn things from our teacher after his death.

Beliefs about Working for Subud:

73) *Appointees to IH, WSA Chair, Zone Rep, etc are given something 'extra' to do the job.*

Quote from recent report: 'The results were deeply felt by all. The general feeling was that we are given many gifts when we work for Subud but that we are caretakers only; others also need the opportunity to do this work too. Some felt a feeling of immense gratitude in giving the job back to God.'

74) *National Chairmen take the 'feeling of the country' with them to the zone.*

That chairmen often can't be bothered to find out what the members in their country think, and go armed only with their own ad-hoc opinions does not seem important.

75) *Subud Congresses each have a 'significance', which you can test about even before the event has happened.*

76) *We can be guided how best to serve Subud.*

Common test at Congresses when volunteers are required for official posts.

77) *Work for Subud is subject to divine guidance.*

Tests mentioned in recent report: 'How do we know when we have completed our work?', 'How do we know when we should offer ourselves again?', 'How do we give the job back to God in the correct way?' and 'What is the sincerity we have towards God so that what we receive is from God's Power and not from our own wishes?'

78) *The organisational 'wings' of Subud possess an inner content.*

79) *We should specially intend that we conduct our Subud business in a way that is guided by the latihan.*

Common idea. Quoted here from a 2010 Congress advertisement. 'Therefore, your physical presence at Congress and your latihan manifesting will improve the decision making process.'

80) *Clearing an atmosphere of argument is essential to arriving at the right conclusion.*

Quote from a recent report: 'We soon realised that further discussion would not move things forward. In these circumstances, the only thing to do is to call on Almighty God to resolve an apparently insoluble situation. With a heart as free as possible from judgement, we would surrender the situation to God; we would truly and sincerely ask Him to open our eyes and our hearts in order to find a satisfactory solution to the current impasse.'

81) *There is a special benefit to doing work for Subud.*

Quote from a report: 'Some of the tests the men did were: "What are the benefits of doing work for Subud?"'

82) *You don't have to be there to 'be there'.*

Further quote from a recent report: '...so that God would guide each one of us in this inner preparation, whether we went to New Zealand or not.'

Recent suggested test for Congress attendees: 'What is the gift I have received during this Congress that I can share with my group and the people who were not able to be here?'

83) *Forgiving people their mistakes is more important than investigating the causes of mistakes so we can learn from them and prevent them happening again.*

84) *Subud events have a significance for countries and for the entire world.*

Recent Congress test: 'What is the significance of the World Congress/for me/for my country/for the World?'

Beliefs about Auxiliary Practices:

85) *What we receive in the latihan is the same as what can be received as a result of the Ramadan fast.*

A teaching from Bapak's talks.

86) *Prihatin will bring spiritual or material benefits.*

87) *Fasting for what you want spiritually should be done on Mondays, and for what you want materially on Thursdays.*

Beliefs about Subud Beliefs:

88) *In Subud, because we say so, there is no contradiction between stating all these beliefs, and then stating there is no doctrine in Subud.*

89) *In Subud there is no moral contradiction between believing a whole lot of things but at the same time going out of our way to disguise those beliefs so that we don't frighten away potential new members.*

90) *In Subud, we have no beliefs.*