

Whatever Happened to Subud Vision

By Sahlan Diver

Since the Subud Vision web site has been inactive for some ten years now, it seems appropriate that this article should explain the circumstances of the dormancy, for the benefit of anyone who has been wondering “Whatever Happened to Subud Vision?”

The Subud Vision project arose out of discussions in late 2006 between David Week (Australia) and Sahlan Diver (Ireland). The two Subud members felt the time was right for a new type of Subud web site, to examine all aspects of Subud, what was working, what was not working, with a view to making suggestions for improvement. The web site would carry articles written by Subud members and these articles would be edited for quality. A team of editors was accordingly assembled and the first fifty articles appeared on the Internet and in book form in June 2007. Subsequently, both on the web site and in book form, many more articles were added. In total we published the writings of forty eight authors (excluding the editors), including two authors who were not Subud members.

Some detractors have tried to paint the Subud Vision team as a homogenous bloc, hell-bent on promoting their personal agenda. In reality, the editors differed significantly from each other in motivation and interest. One editor was keen to explore the philosophical and cultural origins of Subud; another felt there was need for reform of Subud’s outdated administrative system; another focussed on the right and wrongs of the helper system; another’s primary interest was in the level of care demonstrated between Subud members; another focussed on whether Subud dogma had become a major obstacle to obtaining a wider membership, and so on.

What was the function of the editing team? We wanted *quality* articles. This went beyond the obvious need to correct spelling mistakes, typos or bad grammar. Whatever our contributors had to say, we intended to help them say it as effectively as possible by pointing out any areas where their article was weak and needed strengthening. It cannot be stated too strongly that we did not only accept articles we happened to agree with. That would have been impossible in any case, as the editors frequently disagreed amongst themselves about Subud.

Were there rejected articles? Yes, but not as many as you might think, about ten in total. These came about because in the early days we were over-stringent with our editing, which frightened away some authors. We soon learned the wisdom of taking a gentler approach, realising that many people who had something interesting to say were often totally inexperienced in the act of putting their thoughts down on paper.

In the end, only a very few articles got rejected because they failed to meet our standards. For example, one contributor wanted to publish an article warning Subud members of an imminent alien invasion in year 2012. The reason for declining it was not the outer space invader premise as such, but because the ‘proof’ offered went no further than a list of quotes from the web sites of flying saucer hobbyists, each backing up what the other was saying – in other words, not proper evidence but a circular argument of a coterie of enthusiasts. Outside of the minority of articles rejected, we tried our hardest to be willing to accept work, even when it lacked writing quality. Articles submitted by the editors themselves were subject to

the toughest scrutiny because as experienced writers we knew we could take the criticism. As a case in point, four of my own articles were rejected and never saw the light of day.

Why did Subud Vision come to an end? It was a question of balancing time and effort against results. We did indeed provoke debate, but very little of this debate found its way into the Subud mainstream. Rather than being welcomed by the Subud hierarchy, the venture was treated from the outset with prejudice, suspicion and passive-aggressive marginalisation. This is evidenced by the fact that on the official Subud web sites you will find zero reference to Subud Vision. And it's not paranoia. I know from informants that, in two cases, part-time paid Subud publication editors were threatened with loss of their remuneration if they made any mention of Subud Vision. We did get a one line link on Wikipedia, but only because we threatened to report the Subud page for bias and deliberate deception – a somewhat redundant threat because the entry for Subud on Wikipedia has for a long time now been labelled with the warning: “**This article has multiple issues**”. This reflects badly, showing Subud as too arrogant to care whether their entry conforms to basic standards of openness and truthfulness. To most outsiders, this situation will shout: “fanatical cult - keep well away!”

That's the end of my brief summary of the fortunes of Subud Vision. The web site remains in place so people can still enjoy the many excellent articles. However, all the former feedback channels have long been closed. The editors are busy with other things. Our two lady editors sadly passed away in the last decade; one editor has retired to an old peoples care home; others are pursuing new projects; I myself have become a critically appraised author of mystery fiction (<https://www.unusual-mysteries.com/>) Also, I have left Subud and take no further part in it.

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A few years ago, an article appeared on a Subud member's blog, questioning Subud Vision's integrity. I am unhappy that such a post should remain on the record without receiving a considered response, so the remainder of this article consists of a rebuttal of the points made. In the main I correct factual inaccuracies on the part of the author, who seems to be intent on discrediting the Subud Vision web site by bad-mouthing it. It's not that the points he raises are not fair or relevant or intelligent, just that, if he had taken the trouble to check the facts with us, he would have found the majority of his conclusions to be presumptive.

You can read the blog post yourself at <https://subudcritics.wordpress.com/category/subud-vision/>

You may come up against a technical problem that the article displays in a pale font on a pale background and is effectively unreadable in your browser. The solution is to highlight the text by dragging your mouse over it (or your finger if on a mobile device) whereupon it will magically display in a darker text. Or copy and paste it from there into a plain text editor, which will remove the colour clash and convert to standard black text on white background.

The blog poster accuses Subud Vision of a serious conflict of interest due to the editors also being contributors. He says they should not be judging their own work for inclusion. This would be a valid complaint if the articles were judged against each other competitively with only the cream of the crop selected for publication, but that's not how the system worked. We looked at each article on its own merit, without making comparisons. In fact, we published eighty-plus articles by non-editors, with only ten rejected.

The blog claims more than fifty percent of the published articles are by the editors themselves. That's not strictly true as ten articles were written by three authors, Andrew, Marcus and Stefan, *before* they became editors. However, let's not split hairs; the number is indeed close to half. That figure came about simply because the editors wrote more articles. Had the non-editors been inclined to write the greater number of articles, the balance would have been the other way round. And, if you look at the number of authors published, you see a very different picture. Only nine were editors, as against forty-eight non-editors, hardly an editorial team biased in its own favour! In fact, our biggest frustration as editors was knowing many people capable of writing a brilliant article but failing to persuade them to write for us.

The blog correctly observes, *"With Subud Vision it appears the roles of editor and reviewer are telescoped into one - the editors review the articles themselves. That would explain why there are so many editors."*, and goes on to ask *"Who then reviews the editors?"*, making the complaint *"It presents a conflict of interest. They are likely to have a disproportionate amount of respect for each other. The 'peer' in peer reviewed doesn't refer to your friends but to an independent body."*

It's a fair point. The ideal situation would have been to separate writers, reviewers and editors. But this is Subud, an organisation with a miniscule number of members, everything done on a volunteer basis, without pay, by people with pressing commitments of work, money, and family. Compromise was necessary, the question being whether the compromise was a good or a bad one. The blog writer describes the editors as "friends", suggesting a clique. In the main we were not personally acquainted, being spread across three continents and having come across each other only through Subud discussion sites. We brought to the team often wildly contrasting viewpoints and opinions, the only common-thread binding us being a passionate belief in the necessity to open out Subud's potential through debate.

The blog goes on to say *"Many of the articles are engaging and well researched; others employ all that Subud Vision claims to avoid ... with titles like "Absurd Subud" or "Only by destroying Subud can we achieve its goal" you don't have to look far. The problem in Subud is that we've been conditioned to accept as normal what would be unheard of in any professional context."*

This is simply not true. There is a professional context in which such titles would not be out of place, that of the popular newspaper or magazine. We never committed to being a formal, academic journal, more a site that would provoke the regular Subud reader to want to read what the authors had to say. I wonder if the blog poster is a scientist. He is trying to hold Subud Vision to peer-review standards that would not only be impossible given Subud's limited resources, but also unworkable, given that the contributors were mainly amateurs of limited writing ability. The real question is whether, within these limitations, we did a reasonable job, and the answer to that can only be fairly known if every single article is critiqued point by point. In a situation where most Subud publications are full of stuff being at best only delicately critical, one would have thought a publication full of robust detailed criticism would be welcomed as a valuable resource, despite any flaws it might have.

In conclusion, the blog states the following:

"It's embedded deeply in the critical corpus and as far as I know has never been raised or challenged. It goes something like this:

- 1) *If you share beliefs with Subud's founder you're slated for being an unthinking conformist.*
- 2) *If you share beliefs with Subud Vision's editors you're praised for being a free-thinking individual.*

That standard is so double you could name a drink after it."

These statements totally misrepresent the situation. First of all, why is the blog writer talking about "beliefs"? Subud (as officially stated on its web site) is not supposed to be a religion, remember, so beliefs don't come into it. Secondly, I can't recall any Subud Vision article that directly name calls people as "unthinking conformists". Is this maybe a case of projection, that because some fundamental ideas of Subud are criticised, people take it personally due to having so much emotional investment in Subud?

Subud Vision was not a monolith where everybody subscribed to a party line. There were fifty-seven authors in total on the site, mostly not personally acquainted with each other. What are the chances they all thought the same way? As editor, I approved for publication many articles I mainly or wholly disagreed with, solely on the basis they met our criterion that the author should provide a reasonable argument in support of their conclusions. We only asked that the analyses of our Subud writers, and their proposals for reform, should be considered in good faith as the sincere concerns of committed Subud members.

I ask the blog writer, "Why necessary to divide people into two tribes: the for-Subud versus the for-Subud-Vision." That's the divide-and-conquer strategy of despots. You're either a patriot or you're not. Think Trump. Think Brexit. Think the presidents of several countries I don't need to name. Unfortunately, in the modern world, it's a very effective strategy for closing down debate, closing down the possibility of compromise, keeping people trapped within their little tribe, which is great for the people in power because it diverts attention, so they don't have to make an effort to change the really important stuff. If Subud members learn anything from the Latihan, it should be to respect others not for their level of conformance to Subud norms but for the expression of their individual qualities.

Personal Note

When I joined Subud in 1972, like my contemporaries I had high hopes for it, not just as a means of personal transformation but as a means by which Subud, through the transformation of its members, could become a significant force for good in the World. We were encouraged in this way of thinking by Pak Subuh's statement that the latihan represented a last chance for mankind to get its house in order, and by the fact that the longer-term Subud members came across as an impressive group of people. And we quickly gained personal experience of significant changes wrought in ourselves. If it were possible to make so much progress in a short period of time, surely the sky was the limit.

Wind on three decades, just after the failure of the big Subud enterprises. The average Subud group now felt well and truly stuck, going through the motions of the spiritual exercise, but with the participants exhibiting the same annoying faults year on year, however much Latihan they indulged in.

As a way of trying to make sense of all this, I decided to write a stage play, not directly about Subud, but about an imaginary “Subud-like” movement. In my published work, “The Chapel in the Middle of Nowhere” (<https://www.unusual-mysteries.com#PLAYS>), an isolated nineteenth century chapel, now converted to a private house, is the setting for a celebration organised by the members of a local spiritual group. Who are my characters? Of course, there is “top-dog” - in any Subud group I ‘d belonged to there would always be the guy with the big house and the big money, who’d dominate group affairs. And I had to include his long-suffering wife. The play also features a rebellious character, indulged but mainly ignored. And his antithesis, the fanatical convert, hanging on to every pronouncement of the spiritual movement’s founder as if incontrovertible God-like truth. To increase the drama, the party is visited by three interlopers: one an ex-member with a grudge, another, a new member who happens to be better looking and better moneyed than the group’s current leader, and finally an outrageously sexy outsider, the reason for her gatecrashing the party remaining something of a mystery. My play paints the spiritual group as dysfunctional, like the Subud groups I have belonged to, where people try hard to maintain a veneer of harmony even though fundamental long-term disagreements fester under the surface.

It was while writing the dialogue for my stage-play that I experienced my light-bulb moment. I used to consider Subud a progressive process – for sure, there’d be arguments but, over time, through the influence of the latihan, we would become steadily more harmonious and more functional. I now had to admit the evidence suggested the contrary. Subud groups were not in fact demonstrations of a collective “working-out” towards a higher state, but merely bog-standard examples of human group psychology in action, where a minority rival for dominance, while the majority suppress their personal opinions for the sake of a quiet life. What is the best way to achieve dominance in Subud? The answer is simple: gain kudos and respect by aligning with Bapak and the status quo; do not say anything to rock the boat or ruffle members’ sense of security.

To its credit, Subud has always safeguarded the latihan by keeping it free of dogma. Anyone can go along, do the exercise, maybe socialise a bit, but otherwise have nothing to do with the Subud organisation, nor be required to agree with Subud’s tacit belief system. This good aspect of Subud has ironically served to magnify the bad aspect, that it is seemingly the most pious (in the religious sense) who end up running the show. They get their own way because the people who could be vocal in opposition can’t be bothered to be so; they get to do latihan unhindered, so they have no complaints. This situation is ripe for fossilisation and stagnation.

Two Polar-Opposite Conclusions

Mid-August, year 2000, myself and my family were waiting at Barnstaple railway station in England for a train to Exeter. A Subud congress happened to be taking place in the area at the time. A whole lot of cars and taxis were arriving in the station forecourt and letting out members of the general public for the train. A van drew up and six guys, some in their twenties, some much older, got out. They had an air of benign ineffectualness about them. My teenage daughters laughed and said, “They just *have* to be Subud members!” and they were right! Recently I heard of some helpers admitting Subud is now a quasi-religion, as if it were all down to Almighty God and they themselves bore no responsibility for the part they had played in allowing that to happen. It’s this passivity of Subud that I personally find so infuriating.

In fact, I would suggest Subud splits into two schools of thought: the active and the passive, with the latter being hugely dominant. Both schools will agree on one thing: that the Latihan has potential to be of great benefit to mankind. Beyond that, they differ. The active say, taking their cue from Pak Subuh, that the Latihan has to be put into practise in the world, immediately. The passive say people cannot change themselves; it's down to the Latihan, which we must pursue diligently, with patience, and eventually it will all work out. The passive are **wrong**, for a host of reasons.

Firstly, look at the evidence. We once felt latihan had the potential to change the way things were done in the world: businesses would become more honest, political organisations would become less corrupt, religious organisations would become less self-serving. Look at Subud. Despite decades of latihan, its large enterprises failed, some in dubious circumstances; the organisation through its web sites and publications actively propagandizes Subud, suppressing dissenting voices; and, if it is true that Subud has become a quasi-religion, that's as effective a takeover as any fanatical religious group.

Secondly, the passive approach contradicts Pak Subuh. Notwithstanding his massively ignored exhortation to do enterprise, in the "parable of the soils" he cautions against the danger of becoming too wrapped up in "the spiritual", the latihan becoming an end in itself, rather than as a means to fertilise and stimulate the growth of the human soul.

Thirdly and finally, the passive approach is of course the foundation on which the intransigence of the organisation is built. We don't have to do anything; it will all work out. Anyone who tries to hurry the process by actively trying to make things better for the membership is in the wrong; their opinions should be discounted and discarded without due consideration.

Note that I am not trying to suggest all Subud members are passive. Those individuals running successful charitable projects at professional standard under the Susila Dharma umbrella deserve both our praise and admiration. But, with the Subud organisation itself seemingly self-serving, this does not bode well for Subud's future.

Unfortunately, the time for Subud to get out of the hole it has dug itself is probably past. Seventy-five years on from Subud's arrival in the western world, most members are either dead or simply too old. When you have dedicated your life to a cause, it's not pleasant to have to admit failure; better carry on telling yourself more of the same will eventually win through. Many possessing the intelligence or the wit to see this is not the case have long ago left the organisation out of frustration and disillusionment, further concentrating key decision-making in the hands of the mistaken.

Is it necessary for me to be so pessimistic? Do I not have anything positive to offer? I did once. It was called Subud Vision, a means to examine where we were, fix the faults, revitalise Subud and make fresh progress. Unfortunately, it seems the latihan was not powerful enough to counteract the malign influence of people's fragile spiritual-religious egos, which cause them to take any criticism of Subud as a personal affront to their precious beliefs. Do I have a recipe for a cure? Not in Subud. I suggest the only way to get round the problem is to remove the spiritual component altogether; make the Latihan secular, a well-being exercise, similar to the way yoga, itself originally a specialised spiritual practice, has become adopted worldwide, free from dogma. Take away the temptation for people to identify with "spiritual wisdom" and it might just stand a chance, particularly if it could also develop an optional

sideline, channelling energies into “enterprise in the service of humanity”, the noble idea all those dedicated Bapak-followers out there continue to choose to ignore.