

Beyond Words and Images

By Stefan Freedman

The Trouble With Words

Every group with a mystical dimension faces a challenge: how to describe an experience which is unlike anything in our everyday awareness.

The latihan experience is manifestly different for each person. Even for the same person the latihan varies at different times. This adaptability is one of the great assets of the latihan. But as a result, we're verbally handicapped. One person's way of expressing it, let's say, "a direct receiving from God" does not capture the essence of it for someone else. How then can we present ourselves as a group?

To make matters worse, words and phrases that refer to spiritual experience have very specific connotations. They immediately identify—like a badge or a brand—which spiritual "tribe" one is affiliated with. For example:

"Enlightenment"—Buddhist.
"Holy Spirit"—Catholic
"Cone of Power"—Wiccan
"Feel the energy"—New Age

So the task of adequately describing the latihan in "neutral" terms seems daunting, perhaps impossible. Yet if Subud is intended for a wider public we do need to communicate more about it. And if Subud is to appeal to people of all faiths and none, we need to communicate in a way that will include a wide range of people. We don't want to alienate or put members of the public off.

My first consideration when presenting Subud is: "Who wants to know?" There is evidence that suggests that there is a potential groundswell of new interest, because billions of people today are looking for their own evidence of a deeper reality.

Worldwide Spiritual Crisis?

In the March 2007 edition of *Psychologies* (a UK magazine) Tanis Taylor asks, "Are we having a spirituality crisis?" A wide cross-section of younger readers interviewed answered that they are not convinced by old ideas, or by other peoples' solutions. Summing up her findings, Tanis says, "Many of us feel we're searching for a more individual form of spirituality." Books such as those by Dan Brown, which challenge traditional religious assumptions, are hitting the best-seller lists.

Today's questioning climate gives many ordinary people a taste for spiritual exploring. Significant numbers of Westerners are being drawn towards Buddhism because it offers a practical method (meditation) to cultivate peace and insight without requiring "faith". In the USA, Christian Smith and his associates conducted a continent-wide research project on teenage attitudes to religion, documented in the book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. He notes a widespread move away from tradition towards something more tangible, which he calls "therapeutic practice". Is it possible that a percentage of this open-minded generation might find value in the latihan?

When Subud appeared on the world scene many of us were anxious about seeming

different or “weird”. It was largely due to the willingness of John Bennett and many of Gurdjieff’s students to “test it out” that Subud grew, spreading worldwide. Bapak said that perhaps Subud is appropriate now because this is a scientific age when people require personal proof. But are we scaring people off before they can try it?

Beyond Images

Google the word “Subud” and the first entry is the link to our official web-site: “**Subud** is a way to receive a direct contact with the Power and Grace of The One Almighty God. This contact initiates a process of sanctification unique to...” www.subud.org/”

When I was reading about Subud and during my period as a young applicant I was an agnostic spiritual seeker. I would have run a mile if someone had told me that latihan was contact with “the Power and Grace of The One Almighty God”. Meeting even just one of these words, Power, Almighty (especially capitalised), sanctification and God, my antennae would have been on red alert that, despite claims of being doctrine-free, some specific religious ideas were being promoted by Subud. Many contemporary Christians are into love and compassion, not the metaphors of imperium. So this description is not even in tune with the principal religion in many countries.

But today it’s far worse. “The Power of the One Almighty God” sounds uncomfortably like terminology fanatics might use to incite violence!

My first encounter with Subud was through Bennett’s books. Bennett described a direct contact with a beneficial spiritual force. He also conveyed a sense of adventure—an ongoing spiritual safari—that I found very alluring.

I believe that Bapak once said, “A man who believes in God and one who disbelieves are the same. Neither is talking from experience.” So an atheist is welcome to try out Subud. So an atheist is welcome to try out Subud. Each person’s latihan is unmediated and unique. For this reason Subud cannot be described by a uniform creed or belief system.

But what’s the big deal? Why not just say to the atheist friend, or to the agnostic applicant, that the use of the word “God” in describing the latihan’s action is just for convenience. Interpret it freely, in the very broadest sense, and substitute any word that you find more meaningful.

This is a good start but may not bridge the chasm for everyone. For some who identify with the struggle of science and rationalism against old prejudices and cruelties in the name of religion, the word “God” has been too often taken in vain. For many women the word ‘God’ evokes the patriarchal prejudices of Victorian days.

I meet many people who are on a personal quest that could be described as “spiritual”. Such people are often not tied to one specific religion or form of practice, finding wisdom to treasure from widely diverse sources,—like one friend who describes herself as a “Jewish Buddhist”. The common factor is (as I perceive it) a desire to live with integrity, to explore inner resources without being hidebound or rule-bound. It’s not like following a well-trodden path. Those on this sort of spiritual quest are continuously asking questions and seeking confirmation for themselves.

My choreography and dance teaching career takes me all over the world. I notice that in every country I travel to (including the USA, Canada, France, Belgium, Greece, Spain, Israel, Portugal, Slovenia and Russia) people I meet are describing an awakening of consciousness. They speak about trusting their intuition and asking for

guidance, in a way that Subud people usually associate with the latihan. There is so much common ground that I just ache to tip these good folk off that Subud exists! (And sometimes I do.)

But how will they recognise the latihan as a dogma-free source of personal spiritual experience? Some of my dance-group participants ask me about Subud, and talk with me about their own spiritual journeys. Occasionally I offer my groups an introductory talk about Subud. When we compare experiences, many seem genuinely interested in the latihan. But then they read a short written description and recoil as if blasted by a hidden land-mine. Or they go to an applicants' meeting and switch off. I think this is at least partly because of an unfortunate choice of words, which raises alarm bells.

One friend, who was put off as an applicant, told me he'd explained clearly that he was an atheist and had extreme difficulties feeling any connection when things were interpreted in religious terms. The helpers seemed to have every good intention and were welcoming and friendly. Their role was to provide a bridge but instead, unfortunately, they created an obstacle by the repeated use of religious phrases.

I was so sad about this, as my friend had been very hopeful when I first described an experience of benevolent, life-enhancing energy. His work as an educational psychologist is stressful, so he also liked the idea that the latihan might give him a feeling of peace and some release from everyday tensions.

This is why I always test the ground before using the "G" word in describing latihan. For some people it sits well, but for others it's like a punch in the nose!

Words as Walls or Windows

The terminology we habitually use creates a false impression. It makes Subud appear to be a hidebound, doctrinal religious sect. People sense that they are not just being offered an experience (the latihan) but also a set of ideas that they are expected to swallow. They are, in effect, being told to abandon their own beliefs before gaining access to the latihan.

Consider the following, which I found online: "Vladimir V. Antonov from Russia expounds a system of practical methods for spiritual self-development which lead to complete self-realisation through cognising God in His Abode and merging with him." <www.religiousbook.net>

How did you respond?

The goal of self-realisation is in line with Subud's. But did you—like me—find the communication distancing? The writer's intention, I gather, is to sound universal, but the particular language, such as "God in His Abode", "cognising" and "merging" warns me that there are very specific in-house ideas I'd have to accept in order to develop spiritually. Could this even be some kind of cult, I ask myself? My point here is about first impressions. In this age of superabundant choice, not many people would go further if the first impression was off-putting.

I think that the public on encountering Subud may have the same wary response. Phrases like "Worship of Almighty God" sound as alienating as "cognising God in His Abode". And what about specialist-sounding terms we've grown habituated to using: "receiving", "*latihan*", "*kejiwaan*", "lower forces" ("*nafsu*"), "testing", "*rohani* level", "*jiwa*", and so on?

A lot of our new members quickly fade away and I wonder if this could be partly

because they feel lost, as though they've stumbled into an arcane sect with its own bewildering vocabulary. What about getting rid of the hocus-pocus terminology?

If people hear special terminology *at the very outset*, they will react as I did to Antonov's approach to self-realisation. I was inclined to read no further! The latihan is always appropriate to the present, but the way we describe our association can sound clunky or archaic. To touch new people our words need to be accessible and "of today".

We can learn by looking at what the Buddhists have done. Buddhism is fast growing among traditionally Christian countries; for example in Australia it is the fastest growing religion today. The ever-growing number of practitioners in the USA is estimated at 1.5 million or more. Buddhism's emphasis on mindfulness, peacefulness and social action—sometimes described as "engaged Buddhism"—is having an impact on everything from environmental justice to hospice care. In addition, lots of non-Buddhists are trying meditation techniques. Among them are corporate executives, prisoners and athletes seeking to reduce stress, people struggling to manage pain, and people from all sorts of religious backgrounds looking for peace of mind.

How can this be when Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, is full of supernatural belief? (Look at how they elect the Dalai Lama!) How is it that Western audiences can enjoy the writings of the Dalai Lama stripped free of Tibetan supernaturalism or feudalism, and sold at airport bookshops? This is reportedly thanks to the work of Western Buddhist writers such as Stephen Bachelor (*Buddhism without Beliefs*), Robert Thurman (*Infinite Life*), and Mark Epstein (*Thoughts Without a Thinker*). Meditation is presented as a beneficial practice compatible with other religions and with secular beliefs.

The latihan has a similar universality, but it's hard to reconcile this with the way we present it. Some of our in-house language not only sounds fuddy-duddy but can seriously get up peoples' noses, because of words which have unfortunate associations.

Bapak gave us the lead on this. He hadn't realised that the word "*brotherhood*" had connotations of an all-male secret society. When he was told that this was giving people a distorted impression of Subud, he proposed that the Subud Brotherhood change its name to the Subud *Association* (the contemporary term "network" might also now be used).

Here are some more iffy in-house words with suggested updates/substitutions:

lower forces ~ might sound like a theory, dark magic or mumbo-jumbo
Alternative: urges/passions

mankind ~ much used, but gender biased
Alt: humanity/humankind

probationary period ~ evocative of a criminal trying to reform
Alt: introductory period

purification ~ has punitive associations: being purged painfully from sin
Alt: releasing traumas or deep healing (possibly "soul detox"?)

submission ~ often means being overpowered in an argument or by an opponent
Alt: allowing/acceptance

surrender ~ bitter defeat after siege or war

Alt: letting go/openness

Worship of Almighty God ~ unfortunately, this phrasing has “fanatical” resonances

Alt: exercise/attunement

The point is that we have slipped into in-house terms. These become deadening. Words like “surrender” can even sound scary! When words become walls which block people from coming to the latihan, it’s time to overhaul our language. Let’s keep it fresh.

To summarise and conclude:

The latihan is beyond words, yet if we want Subud to emerge from obscurity then we need new words to describe it. Bapak’s formulations gave us a starting point but now sound archaic. They also give the impression of a hidden doctrine. For people searching for a direct spiritual experience, our religious terminology obscures the individual, accessible nature of the latihan.

Some good Subud folk are habituated to saying, “The latihan is worship of Almighty God,” but let’s not fixate on formulaic words. Otherwise people may see something rigid and severe. We hear too many slogans and “sound bites” today, so let’s not add to them. There are many different ways to describe the latihan. Perhaps the best thing is for the public to see diversity in our descriptions of the latihan rather than one “party line”. This will reflect the fact that it’s a very personal experience, which is beyond any single formulation in words. Why should we settle for clichés when we are hosts to an experience which is individual, fluid and evolving?