

What to Do with Bapak's Advice

By Stefan Freedman

Bapak clearly intended all adults to have open access to the latihan. Initially there was no waiting period for applicants. Whereas many spiritual teachers package their approach and charge money for training, Bapak always passed on the latihan free of charge. Because all Subud groups do likewise, Subud never excludes people who are not well-off.

Bapak accepted invitations to travel to many countries, often repeatedly, even when he was getting old and tired. In order to support and guide us, he tested with us, the early pioneers of Subud, to develop our experience of the latihan. I think that everyone who benefits from Subud must feel, like me, enormous gratitude for Bapak's tireless and selfless work. He enabled the latihan to spread worldwide to all of us, people of many races and creeds.

The tricky question that brings up very strong and divergent views is: What is the role, today, of Bapak's words? The answer may affect another question that many are asking: How can Subud be available to everyone?

Subud individuals and groups reflect opinions ranging between two extremes:

- Some would say that Bapak's receiving went far beyond yours and mine. He may have been the latest in a line of God's prophets. His advice should be widely and diligently read, and Subud members—especially helpers—should remember, follow and pass on Bapak's guidelines.
- Others would say that Bapak's advice is an optional supplement to the latihan which many members and enquirers find confusing, irrelevant or even offensive. Subud is in danger of appearing like a new creed if Bapak's words and advice are widely referred to. Bapak never intended to create a new belief system.

Such disparities can be very confusing to an enquirer or an applicant, and potentially disturbing if each extreme is presented as the Correct View.

There would seem to be no meeting-ground between these two positions, but nevertheless there may be a way to reconcile them. I'd like first to distinguish between several strands in Bapak's talks and explanations:

1. the latihan
2. sex and morals
3. mixing
4. life forces
5. the Subud organisation

1. Bapak's explanations about the latihan

To avoid making Subud sound suspiciously like a new creed, while still drawing your explanation from Bapak's description of the latihan, you can transmit the essence simply, without using religious words, such as "prayer" or "God", by saying something like this:

The latihan is a life-changing and uplifting experience available to all adults. It is compatible with living in the modern world. To benefit from the latihan requires no

faith and no course of study, only a long-term view and a little persistence.

2. Bapak's advice on sex and morals

In pluralistic societies such as urban Britain, people treasure equal opportunity and personal freedom. These are cherished and legal human rights, as important as freedom of speech and freedom of belief. Modern people expect freedom, for example, to marry or not, to be heterosexual, gay or unlabelled, and to dress in a way that reflects their character and chosen self-image.

For Subud to grow we need to encompass a wide range of people. We should encourage all kinds of diversity, to make it clear that Subud is far more interesting than something filtered through the lens of a dogma.

In this context, regrettably, Bapak's inclusive vision for Subud—a gift for all humankind—has been unintentionally subverted by some of his specific recommendations. Bapak's counsels on marriage, gender roles and sexual orientation are very much in line with those offered by many “old school” religious leaders. Modern people will already be aware of these “conformist” ideas and will have thought about whether they accept or reject them.

Some people face negative judgements and unsolicited advice every day. The last thing a person wants when embarking on a path of spiritual renewal is more unsolicited critical advice. In fact wouldn't it be something wonderful for us to be able to demonstrate the exact opposite: that Subud promotes a culture where it's safe not to put on a mask?

Fortunately Subud members have the latihan as their personal trainer. They don't need to be dependent on second-hand advice from helpers about sexual ethics or questions of morality. What's best for the individual can be felt through his or her own guidance.

3. Bapak's advice on mixing

Some of my alternative interests which I once feared might be “mixing” I now see as healthy practices, which are a support to me. One example is the use of Bach Flower remedies. I believe that it benefited me to give the latihan time to take root and develop for a while, until I could feel or receive in testing which other activities were compatible with my inner development. I would want to propose this approach to a new member, very respectfully, as a suggestion rather than a requirement.

Bapak's advice on mixing is a subject which often evokes strong reactions. Have you noticed the prohibitive and fearful expressions and voice tones that tend to spring up at the slightest mention among Subud people of “mixing”? If I were joining Subud and noticed such attitudes, I'd believe that I'd come into a superstitious and taboo-ridden society.

In order for the latihan to reach more people there needs to be a re-evaluation of Subud's official line about “mixing” with the aim of arriving at a more down-to-earth policy. I would like Subud to become more accessible (and less off-putting) to those who have a background in alternative therapies such as Shiatsu or a spiritual practice like Yoga. Let's hope that a process of talking together and publishing the results will inform Subud members better, and help to “defuse” the anxiety that makes mixing such a heated subject. (Please see also my article about Buddhism and meditation.)

4. Bapak's explanations about life-forces

I have personally gained a lot of insights from Bapak's explanations about life forces, as given in *Susila Budhi Dharma*. Bapak's intention, I believe, was to clarify the action of the latihan. For a deep process, without external grades or signposts, he outlines recognisable stages. In fact it was John Bennett's detailed exploration of these ideas in *A Spiritual Psychology* that shed new light on some of my personal dilemmas and first drew me to Subud.

However not everyone agrees with, or makes sense of, Bapak's interpretations of the passions that drive us. This doesn't at all seem to impede them from receiving a strong and complete latihan. Bapak's life force type of explanation should surely be presented as something available but optional, not a doctrine. Helpers in particular, as representatives of Subud, need to take care not to reiterate these explanations as if believing them were a requirement for practising the latihan.

5. Bapak's advice about the Subud Organisation

When Bapak came to Coombe Springs in the 1950s there was little formal organisation. As the membership grew, Bapak was accommodating and flexible about the way Subud was structured, which was continually being evaluated and updated.

The organisation grew in response to the needs and aspirations of Subud members and groups. A charitable arm was initiated, then an enterprise wing (SES). When it became clear that those in the arts wanted co-ordination and a budget, SICA was formed. When young people wanted a voice, Subud Youth became part of the organisation. Bapak prompted us but also warmly welcomed our initiatives.

Subud welfare projects and schools have had much more success, so far, than our attempts at large enterprises, but that's not surprising considering the large proportion of teachers and artists in Subud. Remarkable is the number of "spiritual types"—like me, the original head-in-the-clouds—who've become far more practical and taken on all kinds of worldly endeavours.

Bapak's receptivity to members' initiatives in organising Subud has given us a precedent for continuing to assess and develop our structures in a practical way, responding to needs as they arise.

The administrative framework Bapak gave us ensured that "power" would never be geographically or culturally centralised. Hence the congresses and global committees progress between different regions and countries. This flexible procedure, and the egalitarian principle behind it, are aspects of the organisation that might reassure any enquirer.

Conclusion

I think some of our tensions in Subud are due to very diverse takes on the role of Bapak's advice. It would help to clear the air if we could discuss this sensitive subject freely and openly rather than just feel irritated with each other.

Testing about this could be very useful, for example, "How do I apply Bapak's advice when talking to an enquirer about Subud? How should I...." The most useful results

will emerge if the controversy is fully heard first. This will make it clearer what the unresolved issues are. Once we can talk about it openly, the extreme spectrum of opinion about the role of Bapak's advice could actually become one of Subud's unusual strengths. It would suggest that the latihan is powerful enough to bring together people who hold widely divergent opinions.

Uncensored discussion is one way we can demonstrate that the Subud association is not about conformity but harmony, in its original sense. In music, harmony occurs when several different notes are sounded together. The resulting sound is much richer than when all the notes conform to produce unison.

The latihan, the core practice of Subud, is of potential benefit to people of widely diverse beliefs. However access is severely restricted if Subud is presented as resting on a fixed system of ideas and expectations drawn from Bapak's advice.

To conclude, I think that the issue needs acknowledging as a real challenge for us in Subud. Can we integrate the wide spectrum of members' views about Bapak's advice? I think the best way forward is to be more honest among ourselves and to the public, and to become relaxed about the way that Bapak's advice is viewed quite differently by different Subud people. This tolerance of difference can become one of Subud's strengths.