

Why Subud Groups Should Not Present Bapak's Talks

By Merin Nielsen

Introduction

On 3rd May 2009, I put the following detailed opinion to a meeting of Subud Brisbane. After some healthy, if chaotic, discussion a vote was taken. It resolved that the local committee should indeed organise presentations of Bapak's talks as one of its formal functions. There were no hard feelings but I was disappointed, because whenever I talk with people about Subud I'm therefore obliged by honesty to say that Subud 'officially' has spiritual teachings. As long as this remains true, Subud membership will continue to diminish. Perhaps, in the long run, the latihan will still be practised under alternative umbrella organisations that are more open and transparent.

Short version

- (1) Bapak's talks are not just 'explanations' about latihan — they obviously contain plenty of spiritual teaching too.
- (2) After more than twenty years, all the practical advice about living with latihan or about organising Subud that was presented in Bapak's talks has surely been fully assimilated by the Subud community, and, besides, most of us have by now been practising latihan for longer than Bapak had been when he founded Subud. Realistically therefore, if the committee organises talk-presentations, it can only be because of the perceived spiritual 'teachings' content.
- (3) If the committee organises talk-presentations, then it automatically imposes peer pressure on members to respect the talks, as a significant number of their fellow members consequently appear to do, and in addition, Subud members actually come to anticipate that other members (for their own sakes) will come to have faith in the talks.
- (4) As well, if the committee organises talk-presentations, then in effect it is officially endorsing the teachings content, which means Subud is not religiously impartial, which means, by default, that each Subud member can be regarded as a supporter of the belief system that the organisation is thereby sponsoring, whereas this is not the case.
- (5) If the Subud organisation (and thus each Subud member) is seen to be promoting a particular belief system through the actions of local committees or otherwise, then it's simply incorrect to say that Subud is open to anyone in terms of trying out the latihan, whereas it should be open.

Long version

(1) While Bapak stated many times that he was not 'teaching' anything, actually he was very often teaching, and frequently it was significantly religious. This is quite obvious to anybody outside of Subud who inspects any large amount of what Bapak (or Ibu Rahayu) talked about. Even though Bapak humbly asserted that his talks were merely 'explaining' the latihan, they are full of statements about spiritual reality that are plainly at odds with many people's spiritual beliefs. Maybe Bapak was not aware that his words conflicted with the doctrines of various religions, but the logical reality is that he was putting forward spiritual/religious teachings — no matter what he called them.

According to Bapak, real teaching has to involve conveying instructions in some direct method of attaining a goal. If you think about it, though, this definition makes little sense — no offence intended — since it obviously doesn't match the normal English language meaning of the word 'teaching'. I'm not proposing that Bapak was trying to mislead anyone on this issue. He seems to have had a clear concept in mind, so perhaps the translation is to blame. In English, however, it appears completely clear that he was without doubt frequently teaching. Bapak's extraordinary interpretation of the word involved splitting it apart. Of course, anyone may divide up the meaning into two kinds — 'teaching

about stuff' versus 'teaching how to do stuff' — but it's essentially an abuse of language to arbitrarily dismiss the first kind as not proper teaching at all. School children who study history or astronomy, for instance, are not actually learning any direct method of doing anything, but it would be rather odd to say that their teacher wasn't teaching them. Indeed, it's reasonable to say that what they learn gradually changes how they see the world.

In just the same way, Bapak's talks have often tended to change how Subud members see the world. For example, he taught about what takes place after we die, the seven levels of reality, the need for purification and the effects of ancestral sinning, the benefits of fasting, the errors of Hinduism and Buddhism in terms of Anwar and Anwas, the nature of spirits and jinns, the prophets, the future of Kalimantan, the value of engaging in enterprise, finding your right name, your true talent and so on. It's basically false to say that Bapak wasn't teaching anything, and untrue to say that Subud members never take heed of this stuff.

The old argument that the talks are quite okay — because they represent 'merely explanations' about the latihan — doesn't withstand serious scrutiny. We are truly kidding ourselves if we insist that Bapak's and Ibu's talks contain merely explanations. You might protest against this. You might say, 'They're not teachings because Subud members aren't required to believe them.' But that's not the point. Whether or not you are required to accept them, whether or not you actually do accept them, and whether or not you feel that you've confirmed them through your own experience, there certainly are lots of spiritual teachings in the talks.

(2) Hmm, but is it reasonable to say that the talks actually contain 'practical' information that isn't available elsewhere? Well, after fifty years, I would have thought that all the useful information they contain — about practising the latihan or about organising Subud — was thoroughly digested and well understood. It seems impossible that there are any further, potentially useful, pragmatic applications still waiting to be discovered among the words of Bapak, regarding the organisation or regarding how best to approach the latihan and deal with its inner developments. More than twenty years after Bapak's death, the practical-advice components of his talks have surely been assimilated by our Subud community. If not, then probably they never will be.

Anyway, are we to remain forever stuck on somebody's talks or will there come a time when we may each confidently discuss the latihan of Subud with the public, as well as one another, through some reasonable and direct, plain-speaking, personal experience-based appreciation of the effects that it can bring about for individual practitioners? After all, most of us have been practising the latihan for longer than Bapak had been when he founded Subud. Furthermore, there is simply no non-religious basis for saying that Ibu Rahayu can offer better advice about practising and living with the latihan than any 'ordinary' member can.

Considering all these points together, are there any plausible, unspoken motivations for deliberately listening to the talks of Bapak and Ibu? One might be that it enhances social cohesion by bringing Subud members together in a seemingly pious context, but surely Susila Dharma and SICA activities are available for that purpose. Another reason might be that listening to the talks is regarded as a special spiritual experience different from normal latihan — it might be some sort of subconscious way to absorb valuable teachings, unfiltered by mental analysis that could block them. However, such a motive again raises the question of whether any form of teaching is necessary for the benefits of the latihan, which is very dubious. Realistically speaking, it's most likely that the talks in general are treated as sources of teaching, despite any fervent protestations to the contrary.

By adopting Bapak's peculiar definition, Subud could declare that there are no 'teachings' associated with latihan, merely 'explanations', but this would be disingenuous, if not dishonest. If Subud has been dishonest in the past, then it shouldn't continue to be. It might be fair to say there are no teachings 'officially' connected with the latihan by the Subud organisation. However, this would require certain behavioural restrictions. For one thing, local committees would have to refrain from any direct involvement with organising things like talk-presentations.

(3) As shown by our collective willingness for local committees to present them, we in the Subud

community often seem to assume that every Subud member is (or should be) interested in the talks given by Bapak and Ibu Rahayu. Such an assumption has very damaging effects — it creates peer pressure to respect the talks and hence the spiritual perspectives they represent, whereas Subud is not about endorsing any one interpretation of spirituality. Subud, it is popularly said, puts forward no teaching, no guru, no doctrine and no dogma. It is really only about making the latihan available. But the above kind of assumption leads to members thinking and feeling that the messages presented by Bapak and Ibu Rahayu are somehow especially important in relation to the latihan and to reality in general. Members may even start to feel concern for others who don't share their own faith in the talks. By conscientiously organising talk-presentations with the best of intentions, the committee is sponsoring the belief system they contain and imposing it on the membership, while accidentally camouflaging the fact that there's no official obligation or expectation for anyone to be interested.

Everybody is perfectly entitled to believe anything they like about Bapak, Ibu and their talks. On the other hand, there is no non-religious cause to suggest that the talks are directly useful in themselves — that latihan practitioners can benefit in some way just by reading or listening to them in a receptive state without conscious regard to their meaning. That would be like saying Bapak himself was somehow blessed or holy, which is equivalent to a kind of religious claim. In this article, I'm not arguing about whether Bapak was or wasn't special, but it's crucial to appreciate that Subud as an organisation essentially does not put forward religious claims. Neither Bapak nor Ibu is officially declared to have had any divine insight. If such a claim were made, then in effect Subud would be pretty much a religion — and in no sensible way 'for all of mankind'. Moreover, Ibu Rahayu has no official status as an advisor on either Subud's organisational affairs or spiritual matters.

As for the latihan, do we officially say that it is some sort of stairway to heaven? That too would correspond to a religious claim — one which could only be based on the teachings of Bapak and/or Ibu — but we all acknowledge that Subud makes no religious claims, don't we? Again, individual members are free to believe whatever they choose. However, if Subud were to officially support any particular spiritual beliefs while downplaying others, then it would inevitably be making a liar of itself.

(4) If talk-presentations are organised by the committee, this represents official endorsement of the talks' content. It creates the impression that Subud officially approves of and upholds the words of Bapak and Ibu. It sends a message, by default, that each Subud member similarly supports or follows their ideas, whereas this is definitely not the case. Like many or most members, I joined Subud on the understanding that I wasn't committing myself to a set of teachings, and I wouldn't have joined if I'd heard that this organisation officially backed the teachings of a gentleman known as Pak Subuh. In that case, joining Subud would have meant I was accepting his views as my own views.

The situation is the same today — if Subud officially supports a particular person's principles, then other folk naturally have good reason to presume that we, since we're members, likewise support that person's principles. But as Subud supposedly isn't a religion and says that it has no doctrine, it is unsuitable for any official Subud body to be involved in promoting the ideology or perspective of any particular person — including that of Bapak — whether to the public at large or to members of the Subud community itself.

The fact that a local majority would like to hear such talks in a group setting does not make it okay for the committee to be the organiser. I acknowledge that any Subud local committee, in being the organiser, is effectively just following procedures that have traditionally been repeated for decades, and that actions of local committees largely reflect attitudes that permeate the Subud organisation. Given that Subud isn't in the business of preaching, though, I'm really trying to show that a committee is making an awkward mistake if it agrees to help organise the presentation of talks by Bapak or Ibu. Frankly, there is no reasonable mandate, responsibility or necessity for the committee to do so.

So what should happen at any group meeting where a majority of members say they'd like to listen to talks by Bapak or Ibu? Well, the committee should say something like, 'Okay, there are no worries with booking the hall for talk-presentations, except that this committee can't be directly involved because that would breach the standard of official Subud neutrality. Therefore one of you people

present has to make the booking, and be fully accountable for inviting anyone. The booking should be handled as if it were from a non-Subud member, and the presentation mustn't be in conjunction with any event organised by the committee, because again that would be unduly favouring one particular speaker.'

(5) From an outside viewpoint, direct committee involvement in such presentations very strongly suggests that engagement with the talks is part and parcel of Subud membership, at least according to the committee that is involved. It seems to confirm that the attitudes and advice of Bapak and Ibu Rahayu are officially accepted as fundamental to the latihan. It implies the presumption of a built-in connection between practising latihan and the respective spiritual notions. It represents a clear-cut bias where the committee is in effect promoting one particular spiritually-oriented doctrine — yet this isn't what Subud is ostensibly about.

Consequently, this all helps make Subud into a cult that can't be truly open and comfortable to people who turn up with their own religious or spiritual beliefs. It is contrary to the idea of making the latihan more available, and in the end it is actually obstructive in relation to newcomers trying out the latihan. One last possible side effect is worth mentioning — the long-term, inner conflict and tension that's experienced by Subud members who are subliminally faced with the dilemma of treating Subud as a personal source of spiritual teaching or proudly proclaiming it to be doctrine-free.

Conclusion

At the latihan premises or elsewhere, everyone should feel free to listen to talks that were given by Bapak or Ibu, but talk-presentations shouldn't be organised by the committee. That's all there is to it. Otherwise it equates to official endorsement, and the didactic spiritual content of the talks means that Subud automatically qualifies as a religion or cult. There is a wider predicament that's not addressed here — the way that Bapak's words are generally promoted by Subud newsletters and websites — but this article only focuses on the local level. For the sake of historical legacy, there is no problem with reasonable efforts to translate, maintain and make available the words of Subud's founder, and as such it's great for local committees to do this passively (e.g. maintaining a library), but not actively (e.g. inviting members to organised talks). Interested people who want to listen to talks among themselves may of course do so on their own private initiative, but this should be arranged using a strictly opt-in contact list, and altogether separately from the committee.

A talk-presentation that's organised by the committee amounts to the group endorsing the talk's content, including its teaching content, which brings peer pressure on everybody to accordingly respect the relevant speaker. Not every Subud member will feel that pressure, but some just might, and the rest of us would not necessarily know who. In response, it's useful to reduce it by clearly pointing it out. That is, a member might well sense this pressure to respect the talks without actually realising it's there, or that it's highly inappropriate, so it can be good to sometimes prominently announce that no conformity is intentionally sought or desired.

Furthermore, as the objectionable action affects all of us, it's appropriate for all of us to realise why it is objectionable. And if the action arose from a group meeting, then technically the whole group is responsible, so it needs to be aware of any impropriety that came out of its own official decision-making processes. This type of mistake is understandably hard to recognise, stemming from Bapak's statement that he provided only explanations and not teachings. If the source of the mistake had been more obvious, then probably it would never have become so entrenched, but it's not too late to remedy this faulty procedural custom.