

The Subud Inspector

By Sahlan Diver

The idea of improving what we do in Subud is neither new nor controversial. I remember, as far back as the '70s, bemused members wondering how we were going to achieve all the tasks Bapak set before us, saying things like, 'If only we could get some successful business people or professional organisers to be opened and join us.' But *improving* Subud is not necessarily associated with *changing* Subud. What those members really wanted was for Subud to carry on exactly as it had been doing, following 'Bapak's guidelines', without changing anything, but for it to somehow be magically made to work by the professionals.

'Magic wand' transformation is still in favour nowadays, as the comments of members interviewed for the New Zealand 'Congress TV' clips illustrate: Just do our latihans, carry on as we have been doing, and it will all go well — eventually. Subud is like a whole lot of people crammed into a jeep, arguing about how to drive to the moon. Every so often, someone chimes in with, 'If we'd only just stop arguing and learn how to get along, love each other, and co-operate, then all we need do is just keep driving the jeep and who knows what Almighty God will grant us the grace to achieve!'

One of my favourite TV programs is 'The Hotel Inspector'. A successful hotelier is invited to inspect failing, privately owned hotels and to advise the owners on how to turn their business around. Not only is the program a good metaphor for the struggle between reformers and conservatives, but there are some interesting parallels to the situation of Subud.

First of all, each of the businesses portrayed in separate episodes of the series are in dire straights. They are losing so much money it is almost certain they will fail. Subud may not be on such a dramatic downhill slope, but it is not too far-fetched to imagine that it could eventually diminish so much that it will die out.

Secondly, the owners have usually invested all their savings in the hotel, which is often their family home, so they stand to lose everything if it fails. Over the years Subud members have also invested much sincere time and effort into Subud. In many cases, they invested and lost substantial sums of money. They may have even changed their lifestyle and moved house to be near a Subud group, all for the benefit of supporting Subud. Perhaps the biggest investment of all was with hopes and dreams. Many members really did hope that Subud would reach 'all of mankind' and change the world. So, like the hotel owners, they should have a very strong vested interest in the success of their investment.

Thirdly, and here's the most uncanny resemblance, in almost every case where the hotel inspector presents her initial report, it is rejected on the basis that the hoteliers think that there is nothing wrong with what they are currently doing, they just need someone to advise them on how to do it better. Just as we hear Subud members on the 'Congress TV' clips saying that we don't have to change the structure, or think about things too much, we just need to carry on with latihan, latihan and yet more latihan. Some Subud members seem to regard their faith in the latihan and Bapak as an act of piety. I wonder if it isn't instead just an unconscious cover for fundamental human weaknesses; instinctive fear of and resistance to doing anything different, unwillingness to admit another person might be more clever than oneself at knowing what needs to be done, and so on.

Fourthly, the hotel proprietors invariably nitpick the hotel inspector's suggestions — 'I can't see that idea making much of a difference.' Exactly the same comment has been made by members in response to suggestions for change for Subud. Taken individually, the suggestions for change may not seem that outstanding or inspiring, but it's how all these things fit into the overall concept that is the key. In the Hotel Inspector program, there was a hotel which had a window view over mountain scenery. The hotel inspector suggested moving some sofas near to the window. In itself that seems no big deal, but when you saw all the other things she did as part of her overall vision, you got the picture of the transformation she'd had in mind — turning an insufficiently patronised, dark and boring dining room into a cosy, friendly lounge for après-ski. Similarly, in Subud, a suggestion to streamline the applicant period might in itself not seem as if it will make much difference, but it might nevertheless be an essential part of a wide package of measures designed to present Subud not as an inward-looking, cliquish sect with lots of funny ideas and customs, but as the provider of a simple exercise anyone can do without having to sign up to a dogma.

There are those who say we should only experiment with one thing at a time, so as not to go too fast, so as not to upset too many people, so we can see clearly what works and what doesn't. I certainly welcome experiment, but what I disagree with is that we can take it one thing at a time. We need a clear concept of what we are aiming for and then we need to experiment simultaneously with all the new measures that are a consistent part of that concept. Otherwise, it would be like the hotel inspector saying, 'First, we'll move those sofas nearer the window and I'll come back next month and see how you have got on. If the income is up, then we'll try lighting a real fire in the fireplace. If that gets you more customers and income, then the next month we'll try redecorating the room as well.' No. If you have a clear idea of what you are aiming for you do it all at once. Nervously fiddling about here and there won't get you where you need to be. Single changes by themselves are unlikely to make a significant difference, and will probably lead to experiments being abandoned prematurely, on the evidence of supposed failure.

We need to create an overall vision of how Subud should be and aim for that right from the start. However, this does not just mean evaluating everything in the organisation to see which things support that vision and which act as obstacles to its fulfilment — we may also need to do entirely new things that previously we had not considered. In the Hotel Inspector program it's funny how many of the hotels have a junk room where the proprietors have deposited all the rubbish they can't be bothered to deal with. Even more funny is that the junk room is usually open and visible to the hotel guests. Of course, the Hotel Inspector always insists that the room is cleared and the junk disposed of. But she goes further than that, invariably transforming the space into some new facility to enhance what the hotel already has to offer.

By now you must now be asking, 'This is all very well in theory, but does the Hotel Inspector really make a difference?' That's the interesting thing; she really does. Hotels that were formerly dead or dying are brought back to life, both in terms of atmosphere and financial success. We could bring Subud back to life, but only if someone or some circumstance can make us let go of our heavily ingrained ideas and prejudices, and try a totally new approach.