

# Danger of the Kejiwaan Event

or

God knows best, so sod all the rest!

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SF: In my experience there is a trend away from Subud socials. Instead, stalwart helpers – most of whom are older people these days – arrange ‘kejiwaan days’ in which we can relax together, latihan and test. I can see that this gives people an impetus for travelling and getting together. But I have serious concerns about the routine use of testing. Especially when there is a long string of questions.

SD: So you’ve noticed it, too. I was about to raise this issue myself. And we seem to be moving beyond the single kejiwaan day at a Congress to longer occasions: weekends, 3-day gatherings, even a recent proposal for a 4-day event. I wonder what the primary motivation is. Is it an exercise to keep the tribe close-knit? If so, the kejiwaan occasion is the perfect vehicle for it, the combination of holiday, feel-good social, and stimulating activity. Decades ago we used to talk about plans for enterprise and Subud houses, but as we don’t do that any more maybe kejiwaan is the substitute meaningful activity. Or is it that the helpers, in the absence of Bapak, feel a duty to be mini-Bapaks, carrying out on a more modest scale the sort of testing he involved us in?

MB: Also an activity in which the faithful can test abstract questions to reaffirm tenets of belief... such as Subud’s importance to the functioning of the town, the country, the world; Bapak’s continued presence and guidance, and so on.

SF: And the other therapeutic thing is, while testing, Bapak’s helpers don’t have to examine Subud’s situation, or to engage with that nasty critical-mind stuff. They just ask and ‘receive’ uplifting answers.

SD: What I also don’t like about these testing sessions is the way they can be abused to subtly introduce ‘Subud-approved’ ideas. For example in a recent Zonal report, a writer proposes a kejiwaan event that will ‘step into the unknown’, but then goes on and on about the importance of ‘trusting God’ and fully surrendering when you feel vulnerable. Is this pet theory going to influence the upcoming testing session, I wonder? I don’t doubt the sincerity of the writer. What I do doubt is that people have sufficient awareness to be able to put aside their spiritual enthusiasms, drop their precious held ideas, resist the desire to spiritually edify their fellows.

SF: The last helpers session I went to, there were about eight men helpers – including two candidate helpers. One question was (approx.) ‘How is it for me to be Bapak’s helper at this time?’ I got no answer but that didn’t surprise me as I disliked the question. Another: ‘How is it for me, at this time, to read and listen to more talks by Bapak?’ (I swear it’s true!) In that instant I was genuinely curious to know and tried to let go of preconceived ideas. There were some harmonious sounds around me but my own receiving was emphatically one of frustration and annoyance. As we went around and ‘shared’ I put this rather delicately and one helper said something like, ‘Ah well, we’re all different and things change all the time, so remember we’re just receiving for this moment.’ It was a fair comment but behind the questions and this comment seemed to be the assumption that

under favourable circumstances reading Bapak would do us all good.

SD: My example would be some questions that were brought back with great enthusiasm from a World Congress on the subject of 'peace'. Myself and another man felt that the questions displayed a naive and over-simplified understanding of the concept. The testing session struggled to come up with some meaningful tests. Frankly I felt that two hours of my life had been wasted on someone else's badly thought out ideas.

HP: I like testing that helps me understand more about myself, but I dislike testing that is basically manipulative. Most of the Bapak-questions fall into the latter category, e.g. the helper asking the question thinks reading Bapak talks is a good idea and wants everyone to, so he hopes that your receiving will get you to do it. (Don't ask me, ask God and He will back me up!)

And as Marcus points out, there's the testing that is designed to promote Subud's belief system or reinforce how very important we are, etc., and there seems to be a lot more of that lately.

By contrast, as an example of a valuable testing session, I spent some quality time with some ladies at a Congress once where we tested about criticism and self-criticism. Oh, we didn't go the usual route of 'how am I?' and 'how should I be?', but we got to more important questions about root causes of our sensitivities and core beliefs around criticism, as well as practical ways to change. I still light up every time I remember that testing session.

SF: Yes. My purpose in starting this conversation was not to make an anti-testing diatribe, or to be against individual testing, but to caution against extended use of collective testing. Excessive testing can lead to participants forgetting the questions they've just tested, not understanding what the answers mean, and remembering nothing about most of the testing afterwards. In this scenario testing loses its purpose and becomes a kind of entertainment – an escapist fantasy ride, like a 'trip'.

SD: Another danger of the kejiwaan event, especially one that people have spent time and money to attend, even more so if their attendance is funded by their group, is that the participants may feel a need to come up with a useful conclusion, so instead of people being able to individually receive for themselves and leave it at that, there's a favouring of the ideas/receivings that the majority come up with; these then become nuggets of Subud underwritten wisdom which people bring back from the event for the benefit of their peers.

SF: I've witnessed helpers who operate as 'a Dewan' acting as a Senate. They believe their receivings are free from personal influence and 100% enlightened and ought to be disseminated and followed by the rank and file. This creates an unfortunate sense of hierarchy (or 'testocracy'). The views of committee or members have no validity because The Dewan has tested and spoken The Word. God knows best so sod all the rest!

SD: To be fair, isn't that our (i.e. the members') fault? We give helpers the absolute power to decide our next WSA chair, where World Congress will be held, we even give them the power to select their own replacements, so what you are talking about is just another manifestation of the authority we have invested them with. I watched the video of the announcement of testing results for WSA chair at New

Zealand and was struck by the terribly reverent gravitas of the participants. Subud would have a hard time giving up all that kejiwaan pomp and circumstance.

AH: I too dislike what I consider to be manipulative testing or testing that I have a resistance to. But beyond that, testing often seems to me to be an activity that is done just because it is enjoyable or because of the glow it gives one afterwards. And what's wrong with that – people get together to play a game of soccer or football with their family or friends and it is a good time. For sure, if you expect anything more from testing sessions, I think you will often be disappointed.

As for getting annoyed at testing questions that were used elsewhere, I don't think there's any rule that you need to restrict yourself to that script. Why not improvise, if you want something different?

I also find that testing among men is often impersonal – asking questions about how it was for Moses when he came down from the mountain, that kind of stuff. I find it hard to imagine many men in Subud having a testing question like Helissa describes – where they talk about self-worth or self criticism.

My final comment is about sharing the testing results. I imagine this was an aspect of the testing session that Helissa describes and it contributed towards allowing people to process what they were doing, and to feel closer to each other. Too often, I find that sharing is too scant for my liking. I find that sharing and talking about the results in between questions can be very rewarding. Unfortunately, I am in a group where the men rarely do this.

SD: Regarding getting annoyed about the testing questions and trying something different, yes, why not; but the context in which these testing sessions are done is that the helpers, national or international helpers, or whoever, come in and present the testing agenda – it's all decided in advance. Even if it's not, there can be subtle attempts to manipulate, like: 'As we've some time left over I wonder if we could do a few tests about the importance of Bapak's talks to us at this time.' Nobody wants to get argumentative in a testing session and so there's never any really in-depth discussion about the advisability of the tests. Even when there is, in true Subud fashion the helpers will want to shy away from it getting too heavy: 'Why don't we just test anyway and see what we get?' So it's not a question of rules, more of procedures.

AH: About your beef with what you see as directive and manipulative testing, I'm sure there are many who have been at testing sessions and had the same reaction. I know that I have. Perhaps people who find they are feeling this way should just sit down when they don't like the question and wait for something they find acceptable. Generally, I prefer to try and figure out why people are doing what they are doing. I think helpers who get directive are behaving as they have seen others do before them and as Bapak once did. He didn't ask for feedback, did he, or ask if someone had a better idea?

In some cases, I think helpers are behaving as others expect them to, or they think they should. For anyone to break the mould and start doing things differently and trying new things, takes guts and the willingness to fail. There's not a lot of that in Subud.

HP: In the best testing sessions I've gone to here in the USA, participants break up into smaller groups of six to ten people. Then we usually discard most of the

somewhat formulaic questions from off the helpers' clipboards and think up ones that are more personal and relevant to our lives. We enjoy sharing our 'receivings', but only if we want to. No one is ever pressured to say what they got – respecting privacy is important! Since we try to keep the atmosphere open and supportive (not judgmental, nor critical!), most people end up sharing and feeling really good about it, and it does bring us closer. So, is this what we're all saying here? Smaller testing groups, more personal and relevant questions, and more flexibility to go with the flow of questioning according to how people are feeling and responding?

AH: I love the way you've written this, Helissa. I think the scenario that you describe unlocks the potential of the latihan. (How's that for a metaphor!)

SD: Sounds like there's some places at least that know how to do it right. Helissa, I note that you say, 'We usually discard most of the somewhat formulaic questions from off the helpers' clipboards.' It suggests that, despite the members' practice of coming up with much better tests, the helpers haven't learnt anything and are still starting off on the wrong foot. So it does need an awareness from the recipients as to when questions are being framed in a manipulative manner, and a willingness to speak out, plus an atmosphere in which objections will be heard.

A bad collective testing situation happened to me recently. A visiting helper announced that we were going to test in a way that didn't presuppose anything, and then went on to say that we were going to 'test about "the forces", so that we could understand them better'. Seemed to me that presupposed a lot: i.e. there were forces, we didn't understand them and it was of benefit at this time for us to be better educated about them. Everyone was ready to meekly shuffle off and do the tests, the final straw as far as I was concerned. I got very angry about it, I behaved badly, but I did manage to get the men to scrap the tests and test instead around an idea suggested by someone newly opened.

Your sessions, Helissa, seem to be founded on a respect for the individual. But I frequently notice the opposite in Subud when pressure to conform is used to silence individuals. My objection to the tests was countered with 'maybe the rest of us would *like* to do these tests', the suggestion being that the objector is a selfish, petulant person who just wants things their own way. It was quite a battle to get them to think outside the box. I asked, 'Why is it that we never test anything *but* Bapak's theories?' That seemed to open the door to an awareness that maybe they should try something different.

MB: Coming back in late to this fascinating dialogue.... The latihan, it seems to me, is about self-realisation, about understanding what motivates and drives me (and I don't care if people call that lower forces or, my preference, psychological hang-ups). This understanding helps me to change that behaviour which is harmful and deleterious to my life, while at the same time enabling me to develop that which is revealed as positive and life enhancing. In the past, I've always found testing in this area, particularly at kejiwaan days, to be valuable and helpful (while being aware it is often 'of its time' and shouldn't become a matter of routine, as the situation changes constantly).

The kind of testing under discussion here – the 'Chinese Restaurant Menu' list of pre-thought out and formulaic questions – seems to do the opposite, steering participants away from the real business of the latihan: 'Wo/man, know thyself.'

Formulaic questions such as: ‘What is it that is given for me to do as one of Bapak’s helpers in accordance with the Will of Almighty God and my own inner nature?’ (from the last World Congress ‘menu’) and ‘How is it for Xtown if our Subud group is strong and active?’ (from a UK group’s recent list) are merely designed to entrench a set of beliefs and are valueless in terms of self-understanding. The real danger lies in any ‘positive’ results received. These ‘happy-slappy’ feelings contrive to act as a smokescreen so everything seems right in my (and the Subud) world – thus denying not only personal development but any questioning of Subud’s outer *modus operandi*. A recent article in *Subud Voice* accurately predicts a trend showing how, with only one eighteen-year-old member and a preponderance of sixty- and seventy-year-olds, in forty years time, Subud USA will not exist, if nothing changes. The writer suggests the solution is for helpers to do their job better, but in an email to me he states that: ‘Testing showed that the growth or decline of Subud is not for us to determine. That is God’s work.’ To my mind, if you believe that, you’d believe anything.

SD: Suppose a committee decide to counter their group’s diminishing numbers by advertising in local newspapers, and the objection is raised: ‘This was tested in [name of country] and the helpers received we should not make any efforts to grow Subud because “the growth of Subud is for God to determine”.’ Constraining the committee in this way effectively sets up the Subud helpers as a priesthood. Not only are they acting as if testing is a direct and reliable hotline to God, which in itself is a dubious assumption, they are acting in contradiction of Subud’s claims of ‘belief neutrality’.

MB: Precisely. In Subud, we claim that ‘following the latihan can add a deeply meaningful and experiential dimension to existing religious and spiritual practice’, that no person, of whatever belief, is barred from joining and that personal beliefs aren’t interfered with.

SD: Marcus, they might try and get out of it by saying that by ‘beliefs’ they mean ‘religious beliefs’ and what you and I are objecting to is not in fact the imposition of a religious belief but a philosophy of life or a way of working that is a Subud add-on, in other words, that there is no contradiction between sticking to your religion and agreeing to do things the ‘Subud way’. To that I would reply that there are several underlying belief assumptions to this kind of testing, which are certainly not universally shared, namely (1) There is a God (2) For any situation God has a preferred ‘right way’ of acting that we should follow (3) Testing is a reliable and direct connection to knowledge of what God supposedly wants us to do. (4) God actually holds an opinion about our part in growing Subud (5) Although we apparently understand so little that we are incapable of knowing any answers, we are nevertheless capable of asking exactly the right questions. (6) On this specific subject, God fully approves our tactic of holding collective testing sessions rather than testing for each person individually with a view to empowering them and enhancing their enthusiasm for making a unique individual contribution to the growth of Subud.

SF: We’ve brought up a lot of interesting points and could go on further, but let’s end here, with three questions for our readers:

- 1) What kind of collective testing sessions do you find most and least useful?
- 2) What could you do to foster more of the useful kind of session?
- 3) When helpers overstep the boundaries, for example testing common sense questions and imposing their answers on the group, what can you do about it?