

# Pulling Together or Pulling Apart?

*Our culture and image / questions re: organisational changes*

Report for the World Subud Council

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For two years we have been asking searching questions. This is a summary of results.

Many Subud people are speculating about Subud's future. From all around the world, we are hearing that Subud's future is in entirely the hands of God and that our best way to support is to deepen our latihan, surrendering all of our worries and cares. Many who favour this view are longstanding helpers. When a decision is needed these members are inclined to "feel" the best way forward with help from testing.

Other members propose that while the latihan evolves without our efforts, the "outer" side of Subud – our organisation – needs skilled management, including research and strategic thinking. Those who take on voluntary roles in the committee structure of Subud are more likely to be acting from this second viewpoint. Typically they "come up against" helpers who want to test about questions which others consider to be practical or common sense decisions.

As for stewardship of our organisation, there is a spectrum of approaches. WSC has been getting heartfelt messages from members around the world, concerned that the "extremes" seem to be pulling apart. To describe the extremes I will need to generalise:

I will call one end of the spectrum "mountains". A mountain stands tall and strong. It must weather the changing seasons and the battering of storms to resist erosion.

## **MOUNTAINS**

Subud "mountain types" see Subud as a beacon of spirituality which others may be drawn to. Their aim is to carry on Bapak's mission, ensuring the translation and dissemination of Bapak and Ibu Rahayu's talks, explanations and the spirit of their advice. Mountains typically describe latihan in terms such as "submission" or "Worship of The One Almighty God". They want to retain the current structure, such as a recommended three month application period. They work for Subud to raise our standards, and to remain cohesive. Many regret the growth of Subud discussions at congresses and online, which – they feel – may dignify peoples egos and distract them from simply surrendering, and from the many guidelines that have already been given by Bapak. The overall concern is that if change is encouraged it may not improve things, and there's no telling where it will end.

The other end of the spectrum I call “rivers”. A river flows from a spring bringing precious water out into the world. In order to grow, a river will inevitably acquire silt, flotsam and jetsam. The river’s course and shape adapts over time to accommodate a changing environment, while maintaining it’s content from the original source.

## **RIVERS**

Subud “river types” yearn for a flexible and responsive organisation to let the latihan flow abundantly toward society. They want to demonstrate the founder’s assurance that the latihan is simple and needs no guru or teachings. They advocate a wide range of words and descriptions to reflect the personal nature of the latihan experience which accommodates itself to people of all philosophies. Some rivers feel that we are damming our organisation with rigid words and procedures instead of sharing the latihan without preconditions. For this reason many are requesting a shorter applicant period. They see the growth in frank discussions as a healthy sign of progress. Their aim is to develop local flexibility so we will not suffocate and fade away.

## **MIXED MESSAGE?**

One consequence of having these two approaches is that people discovering Subud are getting a mixed message. Our “rivers” claim to have no guru, priests, rules or teachings, while our “mountains” cherish and honour the person and words of our founder. A newcomer to Subud might deduce that the “no teachings, no trappings, open-to-all” way we intend to be does not tally with the way they find us to be in practice. Is this mismatch perhaps putting people off?

Helissa Penwell sums up the situation: “We do need to decide what is our core value today – personal freedom or external guidelines - and how to demonstrate that value in a congruent way.”

A healthy organisation needs people to play different roles. Picture our organisation as a vehicle which needs both an accelerator and a brake. At present the accelerator and brake are being applied simultaneously. Rivers put their energy into proposing changes, while mountains throw their weight into standing firm. Many of our discussions on specific issues have the same dynamic. Endless time – from local committees to WSC - is spent in developing members’ initiatives which then get squashed. There’s constant engine noise but no momentum. The result is frustration; a pulling against rather than a pulling together. Many active members lament that their hard work is not appreciated and goes to waste. Some withdraw from committee work or even from Subud.

Both “rivers” and “mountains” show admirable dedication and sincerity as custodians of the latihan. Many have worked valiantly for decades in various Subud committee and helper roles. And in broad terms we are all cherishing the same dream: the continuation and success of Subud. Our quest now is to find a synergy between these two differing approaches.

Some questions following on from above:

## Decisions

- ◆ How do we make decisions in Subud?
- ◆ Do you find us equal or hierarchical?
- ◆ How would you like us to do it in future?

## Culture

Organisations have a characteristic style of operating. They also accrue in-house words, anecdotes and assumptions. Taken together this is known as an organisation’s “culture”.

- ◆ What is our Subud culture like? For example, are we transparent or secretive? Flexible or rigid?
- ◆ How would you like our culture to be?
- ◆ How could we bring this about?

Lilliana Gibbs and others have suggested we watch out for the typical in-house attitudes (“norms”), which – for an enquirer – may create conflicts with their other values.

For example, “latihan leads us to a belief in God”, “Subud is superior to other spiritual ways” or “feeling is superior to thinking”. Do you encounter any such assumptions in Subud? What would you say are our norms?

## Image

Every organisation has a public image. This will not necessarily reflect its aims. For example the international scouts movement at one time had a dismal image due to numerous incidents of inappropriate behaviour from scoutmasters. Unlike religious organisations that had this embarrassing situation, the scouts made no attempt to cover up, tackling the problem swiftly and head on. They emerged as an organisation held in high public esteem for integrity.

- ◆ What is Subud’s public image?
- ◆ How would you like it to be?
- ◆ How could we bring about an improvement?

## Issues

Last November while visiting abroad, I had lunch with a young man who had held a very responsible committee position, but who is now inactive and discouraged with our organisation. He's doing an MA in Conflict Resolution. He said he had felt "paralysed by procedures, personalities and testing. The answer was always NO even when I was national chair!" After all the effort, time and discomfort involved, many with imagination and initiative give up.

- ◆ How can we actively support young members with skills and vitality who want to be part of Subud's evolution?
- ◆ How might we effectively process and learn from in-house conflicts which testing has not resolved?

## Good Practice

The Subud organisation exists to support members and potential members. A successful service organisation learns from good practice within and outside its membership.

- ◆ Let's hear more about successful strategies in the various groups around the world.
- ◆ What proven practices – such as NVC – might we adopt or adapt to enhance our organisation's service?
- ◆ How can committees better pass on what they have learned so that the next volunteers will benefit?
- ◆ What will help "mountains" and "rivers" to work in tandem for the sake of Subud's future?

Your comments/feedback warmly welcomed:  
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