BOOK 3

A MEMOIR OF SUBUD

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CONTENTS

Preface

BAPAK often encouraged me to tell stories. He himself was the best storyteller I have ever known. He told stories to Ibu, to his children and grandchildren and to his sons and daughters in Subud. His stories illuminated the allegorical mysteries of the Ramayana and the holy books of West Asia, they opened our minds to new meanings of seemingly impenetrable assertions, and to the mysteries and events in our traditional lore, giving them a freshness and richness far beyond their literal value. Arjuna, Bima, the Pandavas, Ibrahim and Sarah, Abu Bakr and Ali took on palpable substance and character to which we, in our own life and time, could relate. Knotty symbols, which we had inherited from our ancestors and acknowledged as being important without necessarily understanding their significance, opened up like sunflowers yielding new colours and patterns.

But Bapak's stories and explanations never let us make the mistake of assuming that the new insights we had been given were exclusive of other and older meanings, however superficial and even 'wrong' they may have seemed to us. This taught me one of the most valuable lessons we need in order to understand the world: life is not about either/or but about and/and.

Bapak as storyteller was like a master diamond-cutter revealing hidden facets of the material he worked on, so that the value of the whole gem was enhanced and our appreciation was enriched. His stories never entrapped our minds in narrow dogma. Rather, they freed us from rigidity and from the stereotypes which divide us within and without and prevent true comprehension of reality.

Storytelling, he said, was a good way to convey truths without preaching or teaching. They served to calm the turbulence in our heads so that a fresh aspect of reality could be accepted without it adding to the turmoil in the mind. He advised me to give myself two inner 'tests' before I told a story. I was to ask myself; 'Does this story put me in front?' If it seemed likely to, it was clearly an ego trip which, rather than calming peoples' minds and communicating something of value, would only create distrust and hostility and enhance the turbulence. And, Bapak said, when I was about to tell a story, I should spread out my inner antennae (and he splayed the fingers of his right hand, directing them at an imaginary group) and

sense whether it might cause offence to someone out there, either because it went against a deeply held prejudice which the listener wished to protect or because he or she was not then in a state to hear it, however 'true' and interesting it seemed to me.

Often, while telling a series of stories, I have been so caught up in them that I have failed to make this precautionary test or my antennae have been insufficiently sensitive so that I have wounded someone unintentionally. As for the first test, when I speak in front of Subud members I am really careful to say that nothing I am about to say has any authority whatever, but that I will only try to convey my own understanding of what I heard Bapak say. If anyone understands it differently, they are free to reject my version and say so without offending me in the slightest.

But speaking in front of an audience is always a perilous experience. Especially when people seem to like what is being said, the speaker is in danger. I have often felt my ego, even seen it inside my head, like a monstrous little lizard flicking its tongue out at me to taste the adulation it is receiving, puffing itself up in self-congratulation. When I become aware of this – it takes a while because the lizard and I are one – I look it straight in the eye and say, 'Drop dead, my friend', and it obliges. At any rate, for a while. I recall Bapak summoning Sudarto, Brodjo, Prio – the three musketeers of the Old Secretariat – and me to do a latihan in the early days of Cilandak (when we used to spell it Tjilandak). I had a shattering half hour. I 'saw' many ugly aspects of my nature which were very different from the perceptions I had about myself.

When the latihan was over I wanted to slink quietly away to my cubicle in the guest house, put my head under the pillow and die. I was making for the nearest door when I heard Bapak calling my name from the other end of the hall. As I approached, Bapak asked, 'Why are you frightened? You are very lucky to see yourself as you are. You see that Varindra is brave, but that Varindra is also a coward. You see that Varindra is honest, but also not honest. You see that Varindra likes the truth, but also tells lies. When you see yourself; you must look and not be frightened. If you are frightened and do not look, these bad things will hide in your heart and grow like toads under stones.' So I learned to look my lizard in the eye, to acknowledge its existence, so that it would not grow into a dinosaur.

Bapak's advice is in the front of my consciousness as I begin writing this third collection of Subud stories. The possibility that

my egotism will rear its head in these words is all too real. And the possibility that some of these tales, or some feature in them, might offend a reader is even more real. All I can do is to ask for pardon ahead and try to be as true as I am capable of being, hoping that what is true for me might also be true for everyone.

Why do I write these stories at all? Obviously not for the usual reason: money. No-one ever made money in the Subud book market. In my mind there is a portrait of the Subud writer as a thin man. If one of us were able to communicate our assimilated Subud experience through the medium of a popular novel as John Bunyan, CS Lewis and Doris Lessing have done with their own spiritual experiences, we might. But no one has done so until now. I tell stories because I must. That is how I express myself; how I bring forth what is in me. In that sense it is a sort of latihan for me.

Bapak used to say that writing was my purification. You may well ask why I should inflict my purification on others, especially my brothers and sisters. What shall I say to that except that no one is obliged to turn this page over and go on reading as Georges Gurdjieff's Transcaucasian Kurd did when he went on eating the burning chilli peppers he had bought, thinking they were succulent fruit, and suffering because he was determined to get his money's worth. Besides, isn't it the fate of family members to have to cope constantly with one anothers' effluence?

Once when the month of Ramadan was over I went to bid goodbye to Bapak early in the morning. It had been a month of rich experience of ourselves. Bapak said (Muhammad Usman translating), 'Varindra, you have been through a long fast from which you have learned much. You will now be travelling in many countries and meeting Subud members. Tell them the story of this Ramadan.' As I often did when I was in Bapak's presence, I asked a stupid question. 'Bapak, what shall I tell them?' Bapak looked at me rather surprised it seemed to me, then smiled that familiar tolerant grin, and said, 'When you sit in front of them, be quiet. Then open your mouth and wait for Bapak.'

That, brothers and sisters, is what I propose to do until this book is completed. I shall sit quietly and wait for Bapak. These stories are mostly from and about Bapak. I am humbled by this thought and I am aware that though writing is my business, the blocks and stones in my mind and in the channels of my memory will not let the stories flow as clear and true as they should. But I hope that I shall

be able to convey something of the rich experience of more than 32 years in Subud. These are parables of and for our time. They are my way of understanding and remembering.

1

The training of a journalist

BAPAK sometimes used me as a butt to make a point obliquely for the benefit of everyone present.

He once asked, 'Varindra, what is the difference between you and an animal?' By then I had learned to sense when he expected a response and when he was asking a rhetorical question, so I kept my mouth shut. He went on (Prio Hartono translating), 'An animal is controlled by its instinct, by the rules within. A tiger will never eat vegetables. An elephant will never eat meat. That is because a tiger *cannot* eat vegetables and an elephant *cannot* eat meat. But you can decide for yourself whether and when you want to eat vegetables or meat, or neither, or both. It is up to you. This is God's gift to man. Man has freedom to choose between vegetables and meat, right and wrong, good and evil. But this freedom you have been given also means responsibility. You are responsible for the consequences of your freedom.'

Unfortunately, Bapak explained, the sub-human forces in our nature, to which we are in thrall at most times, obscure this human capacity to choose between right and wrong, so that we do not use this gift of freedom. Nor are we always conscious of the responsibility of choosing what is right rather than wrong. The latihan frees us gradually from the thraldom of the lower forces and trains us to become increasingly aware of our freedom to choose, and of our responsibility to choose the right course of behaviour and action. 'This,' Bapak added with a smile, 'is testing. Inner testing.' The smile, it occurred to me, signified Bapak's indulgent awareness of the possibility, indeed, likelihood, that we would grab at this phrase 'inner testing' to justify our propensity for doing what comes 'natcherly'.

I was delighted by Bapak's description of the latihan as a way of attaining conscientious freedom. As a young journalist raised in colonial times to think British, and *be* British, I had been sent for what was called 'training' in Fleet Street. For a short spell I was 'trained' at *The Times*. The acting editor, Donald Tyerman (who later edited *The Economist*) sent me to Mr Robbins, the new editor, and

Mr Deakin (they were never referred to by their first names according to the mores of *The Times*), the foreign news editor. 'They have seventy years of experience between them,' he told me. I learned absolutely no journalism at *The Times* but I learned what it was to be an English gentleman. From there I was sent to Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* and the *Evening Standard* where I learned all the journalistic skills I ever knew and forgot how to be an English gentleman. In that process I absorbed a skinful of spurious self-serving values.

The most self-serving of them, largely because it seemed beguilingly self-evident and therefore apparently true, was the 'freedom of the press.' I was guiltily aware even at the time that this freedom was limited at the *Express* by an uncanny and pervasive tendency among my colleagues to pander to the Beaver's pet prejudices. His Lordship had some curious hatreds. Louis Mountbatten was one of them. Noel Coward was another. The British Council still another. It seemed we were not allowed to refer to the Commonwealth. His Lordship, a colonial himself out of Canada, preferred the good old-fashioned 'Empire'.

One afternoon a messenger from upstairs arrived at the picture desk where I was training to select and crop photographs for publication, and announced that His Lordship wished to see me. My colleagues gave me a long sad look which, I later learned, signified that I was tagged for instant dismissal. I entered a huge room and approached a huge desk behind which appeared a large head on a little man to whom I was introduced by a man called Robertson who was, I was told, His Lordship's managing director.

'How is Nehru treating little Ceylon?' was Lord Beaverbrook's opening gambit. I gawped and spluttered, 'What do you mean, Sir?' 'Well? How badly is he bullying your country?' the Beaver asked. I said that Jawaharlal Nehru was not bullying us at all and that, on the contrary, he was very fond of our little island and its people.

'Do you think he'll feel upstaged if we sent the Duke of Windsor to be your Governor General?' was the next dramatic move.

I said I didn't think so but, my sense of patriotism bristling a bit, I wondered aloud about Dudley Senanayake, our young Prime Minister's reaction to the idea since he was not likely to take kindly to our country being used as a dumping ground for banished members of the British royal family. 'Dumping ground? Dumping ground!' his Lordship exclaimed and Mr Robertson intervened to

say that all this was off the record and hurried me out of the room. I had learnt that Nehru, because of his friendship with Mountbatten, was another limitation to the freedom of the press in the *Daily Express*.

But this was only one aspect of the real nature of press freedom. My training gave me many useful professional skills and also bred in me an intense loathing of any form of imposed censorship, characteristics of permanent benefit to me. But it also turned my mind away from any attention to the other side of the coin of press freedom: responsibility. The only responsibility my colleagues and I acknowledged was to stay clear of the laws of libel, contempt of court and Parliament – not because they embodied important social values, but because it was expensive to violate them.

And, now Bapak had solved that conundrum for me. Freedom and responsibility were not opposed to one another but apposed aspects of the same value. One had no meaning without the other. In fact, they were the same thing. I realized at that moment that this recognition was the fountainhead of human morality, the source of the wisdom essential to social progress. Without it, all human activity – political, military, cultural or commercial – was determined by sub-human forces 'free' from responsibility. But my mind whose perpetual questing caused enormous amusement among my Indonesian brothers – like Icksan Ahmed, Sjafrudin Ahmed, Pak Sudarto and, even more, the intellectual, Prio Hartono – had produced another clever problem out of Bapak's explanation.

'But aren't right and wrong different in different times and places?' I asked. Bapak gave me that long-suffering gaze which he had bestowed on me often since the early days of Coombe Springs when I had first displayed my Doubting Thomas traits.

'God's will does not depend on time and place,' he said softly. 'It is man's will that is changeable. Man's will is influenced by the *nafsu* which change according to changes in the material world. The latihan is a training given by God to help us distinguish God's will from that of the lower forces.'

I began to see the meaning of 'Thy will be done'. When we prayed and beseeched God to do this or that for us, all of us most of the time, and most of us all of the time, were petitioning for *our* will to be granted. What we were saying, in effect, is 'God, Thy will be done, but please let it accord with mine.' It became clear to me that human freedom lay in the willingness to see and accept God's

will. God's will was responsible choice. Our will was the freedom of the wild ass to kick up its heels. Wilfulness.

As I grew older and saw how my profession was being practised in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America and the United States I became more and more concerned with our preoccupation with our right to enjoy that sort of unbridled freedom and ignore other people's freedoms. Two of those that interested me as a journalist were the right to privacy and the right of Africans and Arabs and Asians to be reported as they saw themselves, rather than as stereotypes viewed through lenses pre-set by centuries of imperialism when colonial people were looked upon as 'lesser breeds without the law' – exotic, quaint but, alas, quite malformed, uncivilised and uncouth. Prospero had thought of Caliban, the early prototype of the colonial 'savage', in these terms:

Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but would gabble like
A thing most brutish.

There are more recent examples of this lofty imperial attitude. Henry M Stanley of the *New York Tribune* had been sent on a circulation-raising gimmick to look for Dr Livingstone in the jungles of Nyasaland (now Tanzania). Having 'found' the old man – who, evidently was quite resentful at being found – Stanley won fame as a great explorer and empire builder. On his way back to New York he was invited to address the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. In that extraordinary speech this paragraph stands out, embossed in my memory as a classic example of stereotyping the 'other', the stranger:

There are fifty millions of people beyond the Gateway to the Congo, and the cotton spinners of Manchester are waiting to clothe them. Birmingham foundries are glowing with the red metal that will presently be made into ironwork for them and the trinkets that shall adorn these dusky bosoms, and the Ministers of Christ are

zealous to bring them, the poor benighted heathen, into the Christian fold.

There you have it: the people of Africa seen from a zoological viewpoint – primitive millions waiting passively for the boons of the Empire to drop from above to redeem them from barbarism. As far as we know, they, were the first to evolve from the Ape to Man but, evidently, they had no history of their own, no civilisation, no redeeming qualities to distinguish them from the animals of the Serengeti plains. It made a better story for the readers of the *Tribune*, for the industrialists of Lancashire and for the missionaries who, from the time the Imperial age began, had deracinated Jesus in their minds and recast him in the mould of a blonde European come to save the heathen Chinee and other assorted non-Christians from eternal perdition.

Victor Hugo, sitting on the pier at the port of Oran in Algeria wrote about a big crate he saw being unloaded. It contained a guillotine imported from France. 'Civilisation has arrived at last,' he reported ecstatically.

The scales were falling rapidly from my Fleet Street trained eyes. The latihan was making me increasingly willing to drop the stereotypes in my own head which had narrowed my view of the world and distorted reality for many years. The freedom of the press that I had advocated and defended vehemently now seemed meretricious and even dangerous unless it was modulated by the recognition of other people's rights and by the obligation of the journalist to be responsible.

As this change came about I realized that many old shibboleths were still present in my mind and I asked myself ruefully – as, Ogden Nash had done:

Am I just maturing late,
Or, simply, rotting early?

Often I asked myself how this sense of responsibility was manifesting itself in others in Subud. I saw many instances of irresponsibility among brothers and sisters – as they, no doubt, saw in me – irresponsibility towards their families, towards others in Subud, towards society as a whole, and towards themselves. The freedom which we had been let out into when we joined Subud

often went to our heads. Some of us even left our jobs without securing any alternative means of sustenance for ourselves or our families. Some seemed to cancel their precious responsibilities when they acquired a Subud name on the grounds that they were now 'different' people. Some of us had already experienced the changes in us which the practice of the latihan had wrought – changes particularly in attitude, habits, points of view, in value scales, judgements we made – even in our physical behaviour.

But, if we were being honest with ourselves, we also recognized that 'progress' was not a steady movement forward, that we often lapsed into the old habitual modes, and that there were many faults so deeply embedded in our character that they were persistent and difficult to eradicate. In my case I could recognize the Varindra in me co-existing uneasily with the old durable Tarzie. I learned gradually that this 'twin-effect' was a reality and that it would take a long time – perhaps a lifetime – for me to grow into Varindra, if I ever did. I also learned over the years that Tarzie was the journalist whom my colleagues in the press knew and with whom they felt comfortable because he was familiar to them. So I called myself Varindra Tarzie Vittachi as my byline as a *Newsweek* columnist because both aspects were present in my writing. I could only hope that the first would become increasingly predominant in my work, making it more responsible and therefore more worthwhile. There were times when I doubted that this was happening but there were also occasions when there was encouraging proof of the effects of the latihan.

A particular incident of this proof stands out in my mind. The editor of *Newsweek International* called me one morning and said he wanted to have lunch with me that very day. He had cancelled a date he had for lunch and urged me to put off anything I had on my calendar. I asked, 'What's up Bob? Am I being fired?' He said no, not at all. On the contrary. At lunch he opened with an interesting question. 'In response to our columns we usually receive seven or eight letters from our readers. You scarcely write about anything that is topical. But we have been getting more than 20 letters for nearly all your columns. Your last piece on your meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1946 – I can't imagine anything less topical than that – has brought in several hundred letters. Can you explain why? What do you think?'

I thought for a while and said, 'Bob, I don't suppose it is because

my columns are better than anyone else's. Perhaps you have already given the answer. Isn't it possible that there are thousands of people out there who are sick and tired of the tyranny of topicality? They may be looking for something they can reflect on. Could that be the answer?'

I tell this story not as a piece of self-puffery but as an illustration of how the latihan changes the very nature of our activity, whatever innate talent we have, to more humane purposes than they were being put to before. The Fleet-Street-trained Sri Lankan journalist who had specialised in the breathless ephemera of life that consumed his professional energies had been 'trained' from within to interest himself in subjects of more durable value and be able to interest others in something more valuable than the day's topical news.

Fleet Street gave me an outer training in the craft of journalism. I am grateful to Subud for the inner training the latihan has given me. It has shown me how to concern myself more with the responsibility of being a journalist and with eternal human values than with my rights as a journalist and with the daily trivia of the passing scene that vanishes from our awareness like soap bubbles in a gale.

2

New cages for old

THE liberating force of the latihan has been a consistent underlying theme of Bapak's explanations and stories. His insistence on the importance of Subud enterprises was clearly motivated by his wish that Subud members as individuals and people responsible for the raising of families, as well as the Subud brotherhood as an organisation, should be free of the importunate pressures of money and other material needs. He accepted the reality that most Subud members were salary earners with the same indulgence with which he accepted our sins against ourselves and against one another, but he always urged us to use what entrepreneurial talents we had, to become free of dependency on a salary, through enterprises.

Several times he asked me, 'Varindra, are you not sad to see your brothers and sisters living poor lives – earning inadequate salaries or having no work at all? Bapak is sad when he sees this. That is why Bapak urges enterprises. Subud members should not be so dependent. Subud should be able to research and develop Subud medicine, to have Subud teachers in schools who can educate children for life guided by Subud principles. For this Subud enterprises are necessary.'

Behind the vision of the future 'products' of enterprises was the principle of increasing freedom from material dependency. When Bapak first advised me to observe the Ramadan fast he explained that one of its main purposes was to help me recognize the extent of my dependency on certain habitual appetites. Recognition of these would help to free myself of excessive, earthly influences that control all of our lives.

I recall Bapak's reply when in the first week after I received the latihan at Coombe Springs in 1957, I asked what Subud was about. Bapak's eyes took on that amused glint as he said, 'Are you sitting in that chair or is that chair sitting on you?' When I looked befuddled Bapak went on, 'Are you smoking that cigarette or is it smoking you?' Then I understood. I wasn't enjoying the cigarette. It had habituated me to its demands of being lit and smoked.

Freedom from habit was only one aspect of the process of

liberation. Bapak once pointed to a small rock and observed that it couldn't move left or right, or up or down, or roll over. Many 'laws', Bapak said, controlled its existence. Plants were controlled by fewer 'laws'. They could at least wave about and grow. Animals, by still fewer laws. They could move in one place, turn about in a circle as dogs do, climb and move around. They were more free. Human beings should be the freest from control by earthly laws because they had the capacity to choose and even to be aware of choosing. They are controlled by fewer material laws. But, alas, Bapak said, with that glint growing into a smile, they make thousands of laws of their own, to bind themselves. And, he added, they spend much of the time breaking the laws they themselves made! They have even made a special class of people called 'birocrats' (this, with a quick glance at an Indonesian brother from the Bank of Indonesia) whose business is to say 'NO'. If they said 'yes' they'd have no job!

We all broke into laughter but understood that Bapak was not encouraging us to break the law. He was commenting on the absurdly complex social mechanisms in which we have entrapped ourselves to limit human freedom, contrary to our claim of being human beings progressing to perfection along an evolutionary path.

Freedom and the promise of increasing freedom was what first encouraged me to persist in the latihan. I imagine it was the same with many other Subud members. We had escaped from the restrictive bonds of doctrine, dogma and the repetitive ritual of our own traditions and welcomed a way of worship which had no strings to it. 'You can even say no to God in the middle of the latihan and leave the room and you will not be struck by lightning,' Bapak told us in Colombo (Icksan Ahmed interpreting).

This, I told myself, was what freedom of worship should mean. Worship that increases human freedom.

But some of us, it appeared over the years, wanted Bapak to give us new rules to regulate our lives and relationships. To these demands Bapak's frequent reaction was that all the teaching and regulations – the commandments – we needed had already been spelled out by the founders of the great religions. In the case of Islam they were to be found in the *shariat* and the *tarekat*. What we received in the Subud latihan was the *hakekat*, the receiving necessary for each one of us.

During the third international congress held in Tokyo in 1967 a very prominent and vocal delegate popped up several times insisting

that I, as chairman, should appoint a sub-committee to record what he called the Guiding Principles that were being enunciated by Bapak in his explanatory interventions*. Knowing this member's military background and his liking for regulations, I deflected his persistence by not hearing him or by giving the floor to someone else. But, after a while, I began wondering whether he might be right after all: whether, since Bapak was indeed our spiritual guide, there might be some purpose in producing a guide book of principles gleaned from his statements. So I adjourned the meeting for half an hour and went to Bapak's quarters to seek his advice.

'Bapak,' I said, 'Mr X has been proposing several times that I should appoint a committee to prepare a record of Guiding Principles from Bapak's explanations. What is Bapak's opinion?' Bapak's reply was (Pak Usman translating), 'Guiding Principles? *Allahu Akbar*. That is the Guiding Principle. Not rules on paper.' I was leaving the room to transmit this gem of an explanation when Bapak called out to me and said (in English), 'Varindra … be clever!'

When the meeting restarted, my persistent Subud brother stood up and asked, 'Varindra, are you serious or not about the need for a record of Guiding Principles?' My reply was, 'My dear brother, your proposal is such a serious matter that as chairman I charge you with carrying out this task with the help of any others who are as concerned as you are about Guiding Principles.'

A titter, as the saying goes, ran around the house. As it happened, nothing ever came of the proposal because the mover himself got the message and lost all interest in the idea. And the brotherhood was spared a new Manual of Discipline to supersede the one produced by the ancient Essenes. Allah indeed works in mysterious ways.

On a later occasion, a delegation of helpers from a European country visiting Cilandak to observe Ramadan decided to improve the shining hour by asking Bapak whether they should codify 'Subud Rules' for the benefit of future generations in Subud. Bapak took this in and was silent for a full minute as though he had decided to let that one go unanswered. Then he turned towards me and Pak Usman who had come on some other business and asked, 'Varindra, how high is the floor on which you live in New York?' I

**John Bennett, another who deplored the 'indiscipline' which he detected among his pupils who had come with Subud, had done this in the back of the book of the first international congress.*

said 22nd. Bapak asked 'Can the windows be opened?' I said they could. Bapak went on, 'Varindra's wife. Lestari. opens the window and looks out. Varindra looks over his newspaper and says to himself; 'Hmm, Lestari is at the open window. Interesting!' And he returns his attention to his newspaper. His eldest son, who is nineteen, looks out of the window. Varindra looks over his newspaper and says, 'Roosman, better be careful.' His youngest son, aged eight goes to the window. Varindra says in a sharp voice, 'Imran you must never again go to the open window.' Then Bapak turned to the delegation and said, 'Rules are for children.'

But we were children who felt insecure without a railing of rules to hold on to, though – as children do – we often resented being regulated. We would often take the advice and explanations given to us and harden them into unintended rigidity and, in the process, distort Bapak's meaning. This tendency was sometimes abetted by poor – even wrong – English translations from the Indonesian. I came across a classic instance of this in the United States several years ago. Walking into the latihan hall at a sizeable centre I found three or four men huddling among the boots and the coats in the narrow anteroom. I wondered what they were up to but decided that it was none of my business how people got their kicks. Leaving the room after the latihan I saw they were still there, but now with their ears intently pressed against the partition abutting the wall. My curiosity got the better of me and I asked the helpers what all that was about. They enlightened me. It seemed that Bapak had proclaimed 'a new rule' that candidate members should 'hear' the latihan being done during their three-month probation.

I said nothing but on my next visit to Jakarta I told Bapak about these extraordinary goings-on. Bapak looked very amused by my story and turned to Usman with a look of bewilderment. Usman recalled that during Bapak's last visit to America Bapak had explained the importance of candidates getting to 'hear about' the Subud latihan so that by the time they came to their opening they would know that it was not meditation or any other form of 'training'. I realized that 'hear about the latihan' had been turned into 'hear the latihan'.

I was greatly relieved to learn this because one of the most appealing features of Bapak's explanations had always been their clear common sense. I asked Bapak what should be done to correct this mistake – whether he would make a statement in *Subud News*.

Bapak said it would be better to leave it alone. The practice was not likely to spread, he said with a chuckle, because people would realize that the number of candidates at the beginning of the probationary period and the number listening at the wall at the end would sharply differ. Boots and socks, Bapak observed, don't smell too good!

As a journalist and long-time student of political theory and practice I was frequently astonished and always fascinated by Bapak's advice on regulations and organisation in Subud. He constantly reminded us that the latihan, the essence of Subud, could not be organised. But, since everything and everybody has an outer as well as an inner dimension, some organisation and 'administration' was necessary. This principle was enunciated clearly at the first world congress, 'All matters of administration are to be regarded as a service to facilitate the spread and orderly development of Subud throughout the world.' Bapak emphasised that 'in Subud, administration is based not on authority but on consent, because the orderly development of Subud is the concern of all Subud members.'

Those were the first glimmerings of what Bapak later called 'Subud social democracy'. The lesson was clear: organisation was a service, subservient to the purpose of Subud, its form and action deriving legitimacy from the consent of men and women practising the latihan. Organisation was for Subud members, not for the organisers. Organisation, he told me many times, was necessary but it should be kept to the minimum needed for good order. Like William Blake did, Bapak reminded us that freedom without order is meaningless chaos, but freedom restrained by regulations and bureaucratic rigidities devised for the sake of 'order' is nothing but slavery, depriving human beings of their essential faculty to choose and the 'space' in which to grow.

A robin redbreast in a cage
Puts all heaven in a rage

This was a renewed clarification of the ancient question of the opposition between individual freedom and social order. And Bapak resolved it by pointing out that freedom and order were not opposed but apposed aspects of responsible behaviour, the responsibility arising from the inner guidance of the latihan. Not one of us in Subud, whether we were called chairman or helper, whether

we were in a committee or a *dewan*, had any authority over any other member. But we had responsibilities. The political challenge to us was how to carry out our responsibility without authority. Referring to the functions of the chairman at the Wolfsburg congress Bapak said, 'You must not say that it is Varindra who holds the authority or that the people who hold the authority are the helpers' *dewan* or the organisation. No; the one who holds the authority is Bapak.' And he went on to explain that he was only the conduit for the authority of God.

This advice shone through as a new vision of the political function of office holders. but, like all eternal verities, it was a restatement of a very old truth which has been crucial to the growth and spread of all spiritual movements in history. The Sabbath is for Man, not Man for the Sabbath.

3

Holier than thou

ANOTHER tendency similar to our penchant for rules became evident as time passed. Some of us wanted to carry over not only the rules we were raised on – even though most of the time they had been observed in the breach – but also the rituals and practices which seemed appropriate to 'spiritual' behaviour. For instance, the ancient practice of saying grace before meals was widely adopted and adapted as proper Subud conduct. The meaning of saying grace of course is to express conscious gratitude for the food about to be eaten and for the opportunity given to share it with others; the moment of silence was a good and simple reminder of this obligation. Especially in a world of fast food and stand-up meals it was salutary to give ourselves a break in breathlessness.

But some of us overdid it, insisting on observing the practice even when having a meal with people outside Subud who were not accustomed to saying grace. While the others were helping themselves to the food we would close our eyes and go into our silence routine causing the adults around the table to draw back in embarrassment and the children to go into a fit of ill-suppressed giggles. It took us a while to understand that it was plain bad manners to make other people feel ill at ease and attract attention to ourselves as a breed apart. It took us even longer to understand that it was possible to observe the silence with our eyes open and without making a scene while leaving others to go about their business in their own way.

Some of us stretched the eyes-closed silence longer and longer on the principle that the longer the grace the holier it was. When I laughingly told Bapak that I had spent as much as five minutes on this pre-prandial ritual at a meal with a certain group Bapak's laconic response was, 'Cooked food is better eaten hot.'

One of Bapak's most earnest pleas to us was *'Biasa, biasa'*. Be normal. Be normal. One evening during Bapak's birthday a Subud member from Sri Lanka waited in line observing the others kneeling to place their hands on Bapak's knee in the customary Javanese way of *sunkum*. Our friend thought he'd do a bit of Subudmanship and fell flat on the floor, picked up Bapak's foot and

placed it on his own head. Bapak looked mortified in embarrassment but only said '*biasa, biasa*'.

The lesson was simple and clear. We all have ways of expressing our feelings of love, devotion, loyalty, respect and reverence. Some of us, trained in the best British public school tradition of not wearing our hearts on our sleeves (though it is OK to wear our spleens on our sleeves) are awkward and afraid to show such feelings and will not go beyond a stiff-necked bow or a firm man-to-man handshake when expressing gratitude or respect. As a well-brought-up colonial I too was at first squeamish about showing Bapak the profoundness of my gratitude and love for him for bringing us the ability to feel God's grace in our bones. But that passed with years of emotional decalcification brought about by the latihan. Don't we all remember how Bapak, in those mass testing sessions would ask us to cry and laugh from the depths of our being?

On one occasion when Bapak asked me to test my feelings about a question I had taken to him, the emotional dams, put up in me by my education and training, burst and I wept uncontrollably for possibly five full minutes. And, when it abated, I felt cleansed but, out of the latihan, I felt shame at my display of 'weakness'. Bapak noticed my wet grin of embarrassment and explained (Prio Hartono translating) that it was kosher for a man to cry and show his feelings. He said that what was bad was to suppress the feelings in us. Just as the physical body must evacuate its residues through defecation, urination and sweat to be healthy, the emotional residues in us too should be evacuated through laughter and tears. The mind which amasses enormous quantities of rubbish is evacuated by everyday dreams. The latihan, Bapak said laughingly, is therefore 'a sort of laxative', a process of intensive purification. It was normal.

Excessive public shows of feeling, however, were offensive, I realized, to ourselves as well as to others observing *because* they were excessive, not 'normal'. It was plain to all except the actors that they were not purificatory but histrionic displays intended to draw public attention and lay claim to being special. It is the old pharisaical fallacy that being the first to fall on one's knees in the congregation at the temple, and the last to rise, was proof of a special relationship with the Almighty.

I recall with great amusement how a group of Subud brothers in England once decided to adopt the Indonesian *petchi* – the black cap that Bapak, as a Javanese, wore – as *their* 'normal' headwear.

Bapak was arriving in London from the United States. They chartered a small bus to go to Heathrow, *en masse*, to welcome Bapak as he came through the customs doors – a guard of honour of *petchi* wearers, distinctive from the common or garden Subud members around who were mostly hatless. The amusement of the welcoming crowd at this special devotion turned to loud laughter when Bapak appeared around the corner wearing a new fedora he had bought in America, which he wore with the insouciant rakishness of Cary Grant. The *petchis* soon went out of fashion. The *petchi* pack became hatless according to current norms of young men and women.

The leader of these *petchi* wearers used to play another game of Subudmanship to impress others. Whenever someone had returned from a visit to Cilandak or from a meeting with Bapak, he would take the trouble to go to the group where the man was doing his first latihan following his trip. Since I was the most frequent visitor to Cilandak in those days I was often the target of his attention. Bapak had advised me to avoid 'belonging' to any particular Subud group as long as I was international chairman so that I would not be embroiled in the parochial politics, (thus saving my energies, presumably, to deal with international politics!) So I used to go from group to group in London to do my latihan. But our friend exercised some curious ESP and always managed to turn up at the group I had picked. Soon after the latihan began he would cross the room and stand in front of me making hand gestures of collecting the spiritual sustenance he imagined I had brought with me from my journey. When he felt he had amassed enough to go round, he would move to the next member, stand in front of him and make the reverse gestures of doling out the goodies he had collected.

This bothered me at first since his standing before me disturbed my latihan but my annoyance soon turned to amusement and I said and did nothing about what I thought was a harmless piece of spiritual buffoonery. But one evening when he tried to deliver his goodies to Philip Bentin he found himself grabbed by his necktie and taken outside. The scuffle made me open my eyes and seeing what was happening, I moved out to prevent any untoward damage. I heard Philip, still hanging on to the tie, saying in impeccable Etonian tones. 'Dear brother. I have a lousy latihan. But it is mine. I like my own latihan the way it is. The next time you bother me or anyone else in our group I will send those teeth through your

throat. Got that?' The poor fellow pleaded that he was only doing his own latihan, that was how his own latihan was, he explained. But, *mirabile dictu*, his latihan changed at once and there was no more collection and distribution done. Tough treatment for a spiritual brotherhood, we may say. But whoever said that we must be milktoasts in Subud?

At about the same time a helper in New York had developed an extraordinary form of latihan. He would go from one to another in the latihan and make a grab at people's testicles. The grunt which followed each grab evidently satisfied his need and he would go on to the next man. There seemed to be nothing homosexual about this. The guy was only indulging in some schoolboyish 'spiritual' prank. When this treatment was given to me at a helpers' latihan and I protested, another helper, a gentle giant of a man who earned his living as a greengrocer, picked up my attacker by his collar and the seat of his pants, carried him out – I following fast – and held his head over the railing at the stair well, six floors deep saying, 'The next time you put your hands on anybody when I'm around, that's where you go in a hurry, OK?' Once again the man's latihan changed fast.

When I related this to Bapak he responded with laughter and commented, 'Direct action is sometimes necessary.' But I am sure Bapak wasn't recommending such shock treatment as model behaviour for Subud helpers.

Excessive 'spiritualness' is a great temptation it seems. Some of us became holy soon after we were opened. We became so spiritual that we could not bear to go to the supermarket or read a newspaper or a novel and we would sigh like a furnace at the very thought of it. The world was so heavy and materialistic that our hypersensitive souls could not take it. Some of us even wanted Bapak to ban Subud members from reading anything except 'approved Subud literature' which meant Bapak's talks only. Bapak, of course, let that pass by very skilfully like a cricketer raising his bat deftly to let a ball delivered outside the off-stump pass without offering a stroke – a great lesson which I found invaluable as a diplomat and as chairman of the World Subud Council.

When we became helpers we were most in danger of becoming victims of this hyper-spiritual syndrome. That, I suppose, is why when I asked Bapak when a Subud member was ready to be a helper, he said, 'When he or she does not want to.' Becoming a

helper *without* being able to sincerely understand that it is not a special status in a hierarchy, but a function that most of us could perform, if we had to, puts us in a dangerous situation because the ego can take hold of it and turn it into a power-trip. In the same way some people elected to serve others in political office soon turn it into a means of self-aggrandisement.

One of the most dire results of this tendency in Subud was that when a term of service as helper or committee person ran out, the holder of that office felt a sense of unbearable emptiness when what the Indonesians call *djumuneng* – the subtle gift with which the holder of a function in Subud is empowered – is taken away, the void is filled not by the spirit of service but by the ego. It was hard for us to realize that the gift is a temporary loan needed for a particular task and not a permanent grant of special powers. A feeling of worthlessness, sometimes amounting to resentful paranoia about imagined slights, fills the empty houses of the heart and mind. So those who experienced the loss often stopped doing the latihan and left Subud. This is what I call the chairman's syndrome. A count of the number of our brothers and sisters who once held prominent office but are no longer in Subud is quite staggering and saddening.

Bapak took pains to explain that in Subud there was no vertical hierarchy, that a group helper – who dealt with the needs of the 'grass-roots' where members did their latihan and lived their daily lives – was by no means a lesser mortal than those who served at the regional, national or international levels, a horizontal series of temporary functions. But though we understood the wisdom of that explanation it was difficult to keep it in the forefront of our consciousness and to practise it in a world organised in vertical structural hierarchies of grades, ranks and special powers reinforced by systems of privileges, rewards and punishments. Priestcraft, alas, was all too often only a short ego-trip away from Subud office.

This caused many difficulties for Subud members, some even staying away for short or long periods from groups. Occasionally the spiritual pretensions of office holders were taken to such extremes and became so obviously nonsensical that they produced great hilarity. A memorable instance of this was offered by an international helper who proposed that no meeting of the International Subud Committee should be held without a full complement of international helpers. It was a great idea, I suggested, but was it practical in view of the shortage of money for international travel?

Undaunted, the helper asked whether I did not understand that money should not prevent the decisions of the committee from receiving the special benefit of the presence of international helpers. 'Don't you know, Varindra, that a group helper has one angel on his shoulder, a regional helper two, a national helper three and an international helper four angels on their shoulders?' the helper insisted. He said that material considerations should not be the decisive factor and generously offered to pay for his own fare and that of another. I have a better idea, I said, 'You pay the airfare of all the helpers and I'll pay the fares of the angels.' The Subud brother concerned found my counter proposal as hilarious as the others did and joined in the laughter.

When I told this story to Bapak he referred to it in a talk in New York and asked us to test. 'What is the size of an angel?' and concluded that it might be a bit difficult for a mortal shoulder to carry even a single angel. Some were as big as a Himalayan mountain. I fervently hope that my repeating this story will not offend my brother, the former international helper, for I am aware of his sincerity and indefatigable services to Subud even after he ceased to hold office. I tell the story only because it illustrates the importance of taking Subud functions seriously but not ourselves.

I recall, with some sensation of goose-bumps, the look in Bapak's face when he asked me whether a certain helper from Indonesia had appointed 'special helpers' during a visit to Sri Lanka. Detecting the displeasure in Bapak's tone I promptly became counsel for the defence. Those were the days when I was naive enough to imagine that Bapak could not see through into my mind. I said, 'Not exactly, Bapak. He gave special functions to certain helpers.' Bapak asked, 'Like what?' I said that one was told that his and his wife's speciality was to give explanations, another couple were to do latihan with people who complained they were not feeling it, and another couple was to do latihan with the sick, and so on. Very sternly Bapak said (Anwar Zakir translating), 'You go home and tell the group: no special helpers. No special duties. They are all the same.' I said, 'Please, Bapak, they will not believe me because it was an Indonesian helper and he acted as if he had Bapak's authority. It is better that Bapak should write to the group.' Bapak said he would do so immediately and I could carry the letter home. I replied that I wanted no part of this affair and that it was best for Bapak himself to mail the Ietter. Bapak relaxed the sternness

on his face and smiled understandingly as if to say 'People will be people.' And so it was done.

A few days after I returned home the letter arrived and the helpers concerned came to my home to ask if I knew anything about this or could offer any explanation of this turn of events as they knew I had met Bapak in Singapore a few days before. I pleaded ignorance and I was believed because I too had been 'appointed' to one of those special assignments which I had just lost. I said that the lesson for all of us seemed to be that no helper should be given any 'special' hierarchical status.

It was not easy for some of these brothers and sisters to understand why we had been 'demoted' as one of them expressed it, because that was the time when we all thought that Indonesian helpers were adepts, especially those who seemed to be 'close to Bapak'. It took us a long while more to realize that it was not possible for anyone to be 'close' to the inner Bapak – though his family and the older Indonesians who had been around with him at Semarang where he received the Subud contact, at Jogjakarta during the early days of Subud and in Jakarta at his old bungalow in Jalan Java – were certainly 'close' to the physical Bapak. He himself always said he was an 'ordinary man' whose hand would burn like yours and mine if he put it in the fire.

That was also the time when there was a great deal of talk in Coombe Springs, which was then the centre of Subud activity outside Java, about 'real helpers'. A mystique had already spread across the small Subud world about these real helpers. It was evidently a special category to which all of us could aspire but only a few could attain. That was why Bapak took extraordinary pains, it seemed to me, to remind us over and over again that people appointed as helpers were but 'assistant helpers' charged with a few necessary functions such as opening those who wished to receive the Subud contact, giving explanations to those who needed them, not from theology and theory but from our own experience.

Here is what Bapak said about this at the first international congress held at Coombe Springs: '… You should in no way feel yourself to be the leader of a group of people exercising, but … you should simply do your own exercise (latihan) together with them. You have the duty of watching to see that there are no collisions and that no one goes out of the room while still doing the exercise, and that is all. The reason why the assistant helpers should not feel

themselves to be leaders when they carry out their duties is that if they do, both they themselves and the people with whom they are exercising will lose the benefits of the exercise.'

In spite of all such injunctions and explanations the myth of special powers for special people persisted. This wish to assume spiritual distinction decreased in intensity as the years passed because those who held on to the myth of specialness became less and less credible through their own excessive claims to be distinctive and often through the evidence of their own failure to follow in their own lives the advice they gave to others.

But one still comes across the jaunty halo being sported by some who do not realize the simple truth that if I wear a sombrero – or halo – too big for my head it will tip over my head and prevent me seeing at all. This, I suppose, is why Ibu Rahayu – Bapak's older daughter – recently told the international helpers, 'If you feel God's power, you are nothing … you just feel very small … The difficulty is how you have to be a helper. Do not pretend that *you* have helped them. Always pray for guidance so you will not feel proud.'

In a world in which obtaining a status, reaching a higher rung on the ladder of success, being special, outstanding and 'goal oriented' are prime values, the temptation to reach out even to the point of excess is common; it is not easy to 'feel very small'. We cannot *learn* to feel small when our entire education and upbringing has been geared to competition, ambition and 'upward mobility'. We can *pretend* to feel small like the famous Rishi who was known far and wide for his humility. People came over hill and dale to offer *darshan* – to gaze upon this humble man. One day a visitor took a look at him and was departing, when the Rishi called out to him, 'Leaving already?' Yes the visitor said, I have gazed at you and now I am leaving. 'But,' asked the Rishi, 'you are leaving without saying a word about my humility?' The Rishi, evidently, was very proud of his humility.

But over the years I came gradually to realize that there is no way to feel humble except by *being* humble. As Ibu Rahayu suggests, it is only by feeling the greatness of God that we can be small, and that without this power we can do *nothing*.

The most difficult thing for a helper, I found, is to say 'I don't know'. All of us, as parents, have encountered this problem in our homes. Children expect us to have the answers because we behave as though we do when telling them what to do and what not to do.

It took me a long time to realize that it is much better for my children as well as myself to admit ignorance when asked a question about something I do not know or know very little. It was good to be able to say, 'I don't know. Let us find out,' and try to find the answer in a book of reference or by calling someone who might know. This is the way to learn together with those who seek our help.

Another way to deal with a question which baffled one or could not be resolved in testing was to make a joke of it so that it put the mind at rest. Once the group then exercising in Oxford, wrote telling me about a curious problem they were having. At the end of the latihan they found that the shoes they had placed under their chairs around the hall had been switched around by some mysterious process. It was happening often and they had got themselves in a tizzy about it. I told them to congratulate themselves on finding proof of the ancient theory of the trans-migration of soles. Evidently this reply satisfied them all – including the man who had played the prank – for I heard no more about it.

4

Of teachers and teaching

THE one 'sin' in Subud is teaching. When Bapak first went to England in 1957 to stay at Coombe Springs, where John Bennett had established an institute for teaching the harmonious development of man, he was hailed and described as a teacher. Mr B, as he was affectionately and respectfully called by everyone, was himself a teacher of the Fourth Way, the system of self-knowledge taught by Georges Gurdjieff and his pupil Peter Damien Ouspensky. Gurdjieff's knowledge, as he said, had been gathered from esoteric groups in 'the East'. He gave out this knowledge garnered from the masters of wisdom in fragments and strictly forbade any of his pupils to synthesise it or formulate it into a coherent doctrine, evidently because he intended to complete his teaching in writing which would be published posthumously when, presumably, his students had matured enough to assimilate it. Indeed the injunction was so severe that when one of his star pupils, Rodney Collis, flouted it by publishing a synthesis, he was, in effect, excommunicated.

But Mr B was not fazed by any of this because he was by nature a teacher in the old pedagogical mode of a learned man who baked the wisdom he had received from his predecessors into fresh food for the minds of those who sat at his feet. He used to say that the 'daily bread' referred to in the Lord's Prayer was not the stuff that the corner grocer sold but 'transubstantial bread' for spiritual sustenance. His work was to teach his pupils to 'see' and understand his esoteric knowledge and to prepare their minds and bodies to be able to digest it. He was a polymath. He was an expert in mineralogy, a mathematician, historian, and a theologian with a profound knowledge of the teachings of all the great religions. He was a linguist who taught himself not only the standard European languages but also Arabic, Turkish, Sanskrit and Russian, of which he told me he learned enough in two weeks to be able to talk to Gurdjieff in his native tongue.

When Bapak arrived in England, Mr B taught himself enough Bahasa Indonesian, again in two weeks, to interpret intelligibly – of course with some inevitable bloopers which sent Bapak's Indonesian

entourage into fits of giggles and despair. One of those early mistranslations has become an apparently ineradicable part of our Subud jargon – the word 'testing' with its connotations of examination, experiment, trial or assessment by someone else, for Bapak's Indonesian word *terima* (as in *terima kasi* or receive thanks). This mistranslation was inevitable, I suggest, because that is how a pedagogue would see his role as helper: I test you, and I am your elder brother assigned to enable you to seek an explanation of the question you have brought. Mr B found it very difficult to accept Bapak's insistence that Bapak was not a teacher for it would mean that he himself would have to forego his own life-time role as teacher. In 1963, soon after my little book of Subud tales A *Reporter in Subud* was published, Mr B invited me to have lunch at a small French restaurant he liked in South Kensington, London. I had told a story in *Reporter* about Bapak saying that if Bapak was a teacher who knew 10 things he would teach you only nine, because if he taught you all 10, Bapak would lose his job.

This had touched Mr B at the centre of his attitude to Subud. 'Why does Bapak say he is not a teacher?' he asked. 'Bapak's book *Susila Budhi Dharma* is a teaching. It teaches us how to behave, how the food we eat influences us, how to find a suitable spouse, how to find our true vocations and about a hundred other matters.' I said that I myself had come from a long line of teachers – my paternal grandfather was a teacher, so were my parents and I too had started life as a teacher and was deeply grateful for what he, Mr B, had taught me through many years in the Gurdjieff work. But since I had been opened, I said respectfully, I had felt free of the need to subject myself to teaching about spiritual matters by anyone at all including Mr B himself. I know it was not an adequate response to his question, but that is all I could say at the time because I sensed that he had a need to continue his role as a spiritual teacher, and regarding Bapak as a superior guru would validate that wish.

Soon after – and I do not imply any sort of consequentiality – Mr B adopted another superior guru, the Sufi master Idries Shah, to whom he gave Coombe Springs. But his innate nature of being a teacher in his own right once again proved much too strong for the new relationship with his new master to last long. He moved himself, his family and his work to Sherborne House in Gloucestershire where he began teaching Systematics. He was now called Principal of the International Academy for Continuous Education.

Meanwhile, he had written to Bapak expressing his lasting affection but resigned from being a Subud helper in accordance, he said, with Bapak's advice that helpers should not 'mix' what was received from within in the latihan with 'other teachings'. Mr B told Bapak in this letter that he had felt for several years that he should return to his Gurdjieff work because the Subud latihan was 'not enough'. He said that he had tested this decision and received affirmation of its rightness. Hence the letter.

I was in Cilandak when the letter arrived and Bapak asked me to read it. Bapak said (Prio Hartono translating), 'You have been a friend of Mr B for a long time. You admire his mind very much do you not?' I said it was one of the greatest minds of our century. Bapak continued 'Yes, indeed it is a great mind. But see what happens even to a great mind when it is used to think about spiritual matters. Mr B says that the Subud latihan is not enough. So what does he do? He uses this inadequate Subud latihan to test and decide on the most important decision of his present life. What is the wisdom of that?' Bapak looked very sad as he said this and seeing the sadness also on my face he said, 'Oh well. Mr B practised the latihan sincerely for many years. The contact with the Great Life Force remains with him. His mind rules his life on earth but the latihan will direct him to the real human world when he is no longer here.'

He then told me that I should continue to regard Mr B as a friend because I had reason to be grateful to him for being the instrument which brought me to Subud. And although I was not a very good friend in Mr B's last years, my gratitude and affection has never died. In my feelings the 'sin' of teaching was mitigated in Mr B by the fact that he could not be other than a teacher. That was what he was.

I have only one regret. In the first edition of his fascinating autobiography, *Witness*, he took his life story all the way to his encounter with Subud and described it as a culmination of his long spiritual search. It seemed to me that he was affirming his trust in the prediction which, he told me, his master, Georges Gurdjieff, had made to him on his dying bed. The words made such a profound impression on me that I remember them verbatim: 'I am not long for this world. But do not grieve. Someone much greater than I is preparing himself against his coming to the West to continue the work. Look for him in India. Not in your British India but in the

India of the Dutch.'

But, in later editions of *Witness* when Mr B had separated himself from Subud and gone his own way, he changed the original record and eventually expunged references to Subud as though that phase of his life had not existed. He may have felt that it would be an act of disloyalty to Bapak personally to be adversely critical of Subud or he may have genuinely believed that his time in Subud was misspent time and was best forgotten. But my regret is that it detracted from the most forthright biography I have ever read. So it is after all a literary regret that I have expressed here.

This digression may not have any meaning for most Subud brothers and sisters who did not know Mr Bennett, and did not come to Subud through association with the Gurdjieff work – as I did – but through other circumstances. My reason for taking space to tell a part of the Mr B story is that it records a bit of my own history – telling stories is essentially a biographical business – and it illustrates the central point of this chapter which is that we need to be constantly aware of Bapak's advice against teaching. I have found, as Mr B did, that it is not easy to distinguish between Bapak's explanations, advice and what we consider to be teaching. When people have asked me about this, I have often said that Subud is not a teaching but that it is a great learning. Most of what I have learned about life-ways and life-values, and my view of the world in my journalism and in my United Nations work have come from Bapak's talks, his conversations and from the stories he has told. I am certain, however, that the meaning of what Bapak has said would have not touched me as it did or changed my perceptions of reality but for the change that the latihan brought about within me, making it possible to understand and accept the explanations Bapak has given us in his words.

And as time passed, I began to see that the 'sin' of teaching was in imposing one's own ideas and interpretations on what another's inner self was receiving in the latihan. One cannot teach the latihan. It is possible and sometimes necessary to talk about one's own experience because it might be helpful to someone else to make sense of his own experience. But theorising about another's experience is teaching. Ibu Rahayu put it very simply recently in talking to the international helpers: 'You had better say (to members who request help) that it is their own life and it is their own decision. All you can do is to work together with the members, by

asking for God's help.' It is God's help, not ours. In that, I believe, lies true humility.

I had a memorable indication of this in the latihan once when I was witnessing the opening of a candidate who was a close friend of mine. When the latihan began, I saw that he was not relaxing, but stiff with anxiety to receive the contact. After about 20 minutes of this I became anxious that we would 'lose' this prospective member unless he experienced the opening palpably, since he was a very busy man in his worldly life and would probably not return to the latihan if the opening did not 'prove' itself to him. I silently asked God to make him feel the latihan. The next second I felt I had been given a sharp blow on my head (by my familiar guardian angel?) and I realized instantaneously that it was none of my business. I laughed out loud when this understanding came – it was a huge relief to let go of my anxiety and the *wish* to help. Then it was possible to return to my own latihan which was the only way I could possibly be helpful.

Bapak often used symbols and stories to guide us in applying ourselves to the latihan but he was severe with any helper who told people what to do in the latihan or how the latihan worked. An Indonesian once produced an anatomical chart describing how the Great Life Force coursed through the mind and body, to enable members to see how it worked. Another began to develop a latihan manual – similar to Jane Fonda's slimming instruction book. An instruction was once given to a member in a group to sense the body, part by part – a procedure reminiscent of Gurdjieff's set exercises in self-remembering. All these imaginative spiritual flights were shot down in flames.

A part of the problem it seemed to me, was semantic – the early use of the word 'exercise' as a synonym for receiving the latihan. To defuse the attempt to recreate the self-remembering exercise, Bapak asked Mariamah Wichman to tell the story of an experience she had had when Bapak was visiting Vienna in the early days of Subud's spread in Europe. Mariamah (then Margaret) had been walking across the park towards the apartment where Bapak was staying when she realized she had not practised the self-remembering exercise. She promptly began to be 'aware' of herself. As she was crossing the street, she heard a piercing whistle and 'awoke' from her state to see a traffic policeman on the side walk, arms akimbo, wagging his head at her. 'Madam' he said reprovingly, 'I had

switched on the light to let you cross. And *you* were switched off!' The latihan, Bapak said, happens 'by itself'. No teaching aids are necessary. We 'cannot use the mind and the will in the latihan'. We can only be willing, as sincerely as we can, to receive the latihan.

In London Bapak came to a mass latihan held at the great Bloomsbury Hall. Pak Usman and I were attending on him. As we entered, 600 men arranged themselves to face Bapak. When Bapak said 'begin' some members, who had placed themselves right in front, at once began to do their number, lifting their arms and shouting the name of God. Bapak immediately said 'finish' but could not make himself heard in the din; Usman and I went through the crowd relaying the word. When quiet was restored Bapak told us all to arrange ourselves in orderly rows and sit down on the floor. He said 'Bapak does not want to see yesterday's latihan. The latihan is not a practice. It is a receiving which comes when you are relaxed, in a state of *iklas* (sincerity, or willingness to let go)'.

Then Bapak told us of the wayang shadow puppet drama. The puppet master first throws on the screen the triangular shadow representing a great volcano. It is held up to view, still, for a minute or two. And the gamelan orchestra then begins beating a vibrato on the percussion instruments. The shadow starts vibrating, slowly, then faster, and moves to the left and to the right. Bapak began saying *la - illah - illah - la illah - illallah* to the rhythm of the movement of the shadow. 'Now,' Bapak said, 'the drama begins.' We saw the importance of being patient. Patience, I realized, was an essential attribute of sincerity. We had to wait patiently until the vibrations generated by the latihan within us *moved* us. Doing 'yesterday's latihan' was to make movements generated by our minds. It is our will at work, not God's. There was no teaching in what Bapak did and said. But, *mashallah*, there was a great lesson there.

Bapak illustrated the need for sincerity and surrender in the latihan with a parable that I have related often but which never seems to lose its force in the retelling: A man feels he is being attacked by many kinds of fierce animals. So he runs away from them, more and more desperately. But they keep running after him. Tigers and wild dogs snap at his heels. Snakes, spiders and other creepy things crawl towards him. Poisonous plants reach out to grab him. He keeps on running. But they are gaining on him. And when he can run no more, he finds himself on the brink of a deep abyss. But it is only 10 feet wide. Beyond the abyss is beautiful open

country with no wild animals, no thorny plants. Even a young boy can leap across the narrow chasm. But he is frightened that he might fall into it. He looks over his shoulder and sees the animals coming. He is at his wits' end. But God is merciful. A rope is dropped from above, suspended above his head. All he has to do now is to clutch it and swing himself across the free and open land. He reaches for it, but it is just six inches beyond his ordinary reach. He must jump up only six inches to grab the rope. But he dares not. He looks at it again but doesn't dare to let go of his fear. So he turns about and begins running again …

Often in the quiet time before the latihan, I remember this story, and tell myself I must be willing to let go a little more than I have been doing. Just six inches.

5

Adam and Eve

IN *Assignment Subud*, I reported about my asking Bapak the true meaning of the story of Adam and Eve. He asked, 'You mean about Adam and Eve and the apple?' He paused for a while and said in an exaggerated stage whisper, 'Top secret'. That was 25 years ago. Over the years, he added bits and pieces of information which I squirrelled away avidly and pieced together to explain to myself the meaning of this highly classified mystery. When Bapak was in Paris in the summer of 1964 he stayed in a penthouse apartment in Rue Eugene Manuel. He seemed to me to be in an extraordinary light state during that entire visit which began in Marseilles and, after Paris, continued through many European countries. He slept very little but was constantly looking out for familiar faces to be with. He actually needed to speak to us not only for our sake but for his own. That was what made the occasion extraordinary.

Very late one evening he told us about Adam and Eve (Muhammad Usman translating): Adam was living happily in Paradise when God called him into his office one day and showed him a map of the Universe: 'You see that little planet down there?' Adam nodded. 'I want you to go down there and populate it.' Adam demurred, but God insisted. To make the sentence lighter, God said that it wasn't for ever. He could return to Paradise, in 63 years … Adam woke up on the Earth as a *manusia* – Man. It was very different from Paradise and as Adam walked about the gardens and the forests he felt very lonely. God took pity on Adam and split him into two equal parts – Male and Female – so that he could have a companion. Adam and Eve began to populate the Earth with their children. Adam no longer felt lonely and exiled from Paradise. And, indeed, he came to like the Earth and the children and grand-children that he and Eve had generated. Adam's sixty-third birthday arrived but he showed no sign of wanting to return to Paradise. God asked, 'Adam, how about it?' Adam said 'God, I like it here. Besides, there is a lot more that needs doing here, to look after these people.' So God gave in. Adam lived on much longer. He stayed on for 800 years. And then God said, in a peremptory tone, 'Adam. Time's up.

Come on back.' Adam was now an older and wiser man. He bade good-bye to the people on Earth and lay down and died. When he woke up in Paradise he remembered the Earth but realized that Paradise was very different, and much nicer.

He became re-acclimatised and, after a while, wondered why he had been foolish enough to stay on down there. He was enjoying himself. Then one day God sent for him again. 'Adam,' God said, 'I have a job for you.' Adam immediately became alarmed. 'Not that place again, God. Please not there again.' But God said 'Yes, I am afraid it is so. Those people you bred there have gone off the right track in spite of the messages I sent through you. It is necessary that you go back and guide them towards the right path again.' Adam saw that God was in no mood for argument. So he bowed his head submissively and consented to leave his life in Paradise once more and to return to Earth.

I nearly fell off my chair when the story ended. The enormity of what it meant and why Bapak had told it struck me forcibly. Bapak was 63! And he was saying that it was time for him to return but he would stay on for a while yet. I hugged the story close to my feelings for a minute or two as Bapak smoked his cigarette. And then my head began to nag with a question. 'What about the apple?' I asked, the perennial journalist trying to get all the 'facts' in, never mind the wholeness of the Truth in his feelings. Bapak gave me that look and murmured, 'Some other time. *Nanti*; later.' I felt a bit squashed but consoled myself with the thought of the riches we had just been endowed with.

There was plenty of meat in the story for my mind to chew on for years … Adam, when he was born, was not a male but Man. The word derives from the Sanskrit *Manu*, the Hand of God. It is not sexually differentiated. Man contained both principles, male and female. Man was halved to make *Purusha* (Male) and *Wanita* (Female). Eve was not a second class citizen, a by-product of a male rib but an equal half of Man. That 'spare' rib myth was invented by male theologians who, at that time – as now – could not accept the notion that Eve, who was made out of Adam, could be an equal partner. Indeed in the Greek Bible, the second oldest extant Bible, the word used is not 'rib' but *corto* or side, the word from which English words like coast (sea-side) derive. On another occasion during that same journey, Bapak elucidated this point very clearly: 'Eve came from God through Adam. She was born second but was

not second to him. *Sama-sama*. Same. Equal.'

I recall being in a 'delegation' of Buddhist Subud members in Sri Lanka who were feeling a little resentful that Bapak never seemed to include the Buddha in the line of the great prophets and teachers on whose messages the great religions were founded. Bapak spoke often about Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad but never, in that context, about the Buddha. As spokesman, I asked Bapak why he did not mention 'our man' as it were. Bapak, in a pained tone, said, 'Bapak often speaks of the Buddha.' I said I'd heard many talks of Bapak but did not remember any mention of the Buddha. Bapak said, 'Oh you mean the Gautama Buddha? Don't you know as Buddhists that Gautama was the twenty-fourth in a long line of Buddhas? The first was Adam. Bapak often refers to the Prophet Adam. "Buddha" means perfected Man. A man in whom both principles, male and female, are perfectly balanced. That is why in depictions of Gautama there is no sexual differentiation. One of the distinguishing marks of a Buddha, according to the scriptural tradition, is that the genitals are retracted into his body. Is that not so? Adam was both male and female – not a hermaphrodite, but Man without sexual differentiation, to symbolize perfection.

'From Adam came two great lines of human beings with the Great Life Force, carrying a message from the Origin. One was the long line of Buddhas who attained perfection by dint of devotion and effort. The other was a shorter line, namely five – Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad who received the Great Life Force as a gift, without special effort on their part.' I interrupted, 'Who is the fifth?' Bapak waved away my loaded question with a terse answer, 'Adam was the first.'

And he continued to give us a symbolic explanation of the line of prophets: 'The symbol of Abraham is white water representing the seminal fluid which flows through the channel of the law giver, Moses. The child Jesus is born. The child grows up to be a man – the name Muhammad means Man. And now it is time for Man's *jiwa* to grow.' Adam as Man, I realized, was the clue to the mysterious story of Paradise Lost. From occasional fragments of conversational references to the Adam and Eve myth it was possible to compose an account of its meaning which has inspired my own mind.

I offer it here with the forenote that it is my own synthesis, not something Bapak ever spelled out as a whole explanation. So, please

be free to reject it as an errant piece of imagination. The meaning of the apple was a crucial clue. Bapak said the apple was half-ripe, half green, representing Right and Wrong, Good and Evil. Since everything in the universe was created by God, so was the apple. The Old Masters who painted scenes of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden knew this and painted the apple half red, half green. Even the apples decorating Christmas trees were red and green in earlier centuries. And the tradition is still to be found even in the plastic or glass 'apples' now sold at Woolworths, the difference often being that individual red apples and green apples are sold in the same package, probably because it is easier for the manufacturer not to have to do two-coloured single apples. Of course, this half-ripe, half green idea was exactly appropriate to the myth. The apple tree was the 'tree of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil' that God had planted in Eden.

God had given Adam and Eve the tree but warned them that if they ate of it there would be consequences. The snake, which represents the mind in many oriental myths, the bearer of the diamond of mental illumination, persuaded them, again appropriately, to have a go – to experiment – despite the warning. Adam and Eve, the first human beings on Earth who, according to the Darwinian idea, were the first to evolve from beast to Man, were still being inner-directed by their animal instincts. At first they had no problems with choosing between good and evil since they did only what their instincts suggested. But, the moment they ate of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, they were liberated from the irresistible power of instinct, and incurred the responsibility for themselves and all their progeny for ever and a day, of having to assume the moral responsibility of choosing between right and wrong, good and evil.

That, for me, was the Fall or separation – not from God's Grace but from total dependency on animal instinct for the decisions we must make and the actions we perform. It was an exile from total control to total freedom modulated by the responsibility to make moral choices. And, as all of us, especially those like me, who have committed many errors in our lifetime – errors of commission as well as omission against ourselves, against our families, against our own societies and against strangers and enemies – know only too well, making moral choices is the most awesome thing about being human.

Where does this story of Adam and Eve take us? Back to the beginning of this book, to the freedom to make responsible choices. On worldly matters – making business decisions, choosing which school our children should attend, which physician to consult, which house to buy, where to go for a vacation, which job to take and the array of 'problems' which beset our workaday lives, we are constrained by practical limits and other material considerations. We cannot avoid using our God-given brains to study the implications of one choice or another, to consult expertise if we do not have it in our own experience, to use that increasingly rare commodity – common sense – when we make a decision. Through many years of practising the latihan, the faculties with which we come to adopt viewpoints, make value-judgements and perform the necessary chores, may be influenced so that, without having to wait for 800 years as Adam did, we might become older and wiser.

So, as we all did at the beginning in Subud we cannot take off our heads with our hats and hang them up, just because we receive God's grace. The latihan does not give us a philosopher's stone which we can use with casual panache to get us easily and safely through this material world. I often tell my younger brothers and sisters who talk to me about their life problems that all I can do as a helper is to assist them from my experience to sort out what is involved and let them make their own decisions and choices.

On one memorable occasion the directors of a successful business corporation in Subud asked me my opinion about a proposal by one of the partners that a set of helpers should be assigned to attend their board meetings. Since my opinion had been sought, I could give it straight. 'If any helper tried to make business decisions for me by testing I would throw him out of the window.' Most of them took it on the bounce but the man who had proposed the idea smiled a bit abashed and spluttered something defensively. My advice did not prevail. His did. This may sound like 'I told you so', but to complete the story it must be said that the business did not last much longer.

Another set of putative entrepreneurs in England went so far as to appoint a spiritual director, a helper with a salary, an office, a telephone and the usual paraphernalia of an executive, to guide them in their day-to-day business decisions. Evidently, the telephone was a hot line to the Almighty and the spiritual director was to give them the inside track in the commercial rat race. I

learned of the extraordinary arrangement when, on the advice of the helper, they called me in to ask if I would agree to be the arbitrator should any dispute arise among them about the division of the profits they were going to amass. I remembered the ancient fable about the dairymaid carrying a pot of milk on her head as she walked home dreaming of becoming richer and richer until she became a queen. When her courtiers asked her for favours she would nod regally in agreement and she suited her action to the word and spilt all her milk. I declined the honour.

It has been very difficult for many Subud brothers and sisters not to use testing in making everyday life decisions. Some of them often have asked me why they should not do so since Bapak made business decisions and he was always in a state of latihan, was he not? My usual answer has been, 'Bapak is Bapak'. But even as I have said it, I have known it was too flip an answer. They deserved a clearer and less oracular explanation but I did not have one to offer. I too have had questions in my mind about Subud enterprises and it has taken many years of observing many of them collapsing in ruins before I have been able to make any sense of it at all. But more of that later.

6

Down to earth

THOUGH Bapak often spoke about our life hereafter, he never allowed us to forget our lives here and now. 'Before you become a general,' he said, 'you must first be a good foot soldier and learn to live in the barracks.' And with a sardonic smile, he added, 'And you will have to get used to toilets without doors. This is the satanic world of pain and suffering and injustice where Satan's laws prevail.' I was with him when the news of Martin Luther King's assassination was brought to him. Men like King who had devoted the best part of their lives to assuage human cruelty and injustice towards their fellow-men, fell victim to a single bullet from a madman, he reflected. Gandhi, John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy all died because they worked to mitigate injustice. Assassins often try to kill dictators and tyrants – sometimes ten attempts on their lives are made, but they survive. Sukarno, Bapak said, had been shot at many times but he was unscathed. People believe that he had a magic charm he carried in his mouth whenever he went out of the presidential palace, to protect himself from bullets. He did not need that, Bapak said. The lower forces took care of it.

It was hard for me to accept the notion that this earth was the hell that traditional religions had warned us against in spite of plentiful evidence around us of the truth of Bapak's words. For many millennia the lives of human beings had been grievously distorted by war, internecine conflict, cruel relationships – between wives and husbands, parents and children, grinding poverty for the many co-existing with obscene overabundance for the few, epidemic diseases, constant fear and insatiable greed. This has been the stuff of our great dramatic epics, our music, poetry and novels.

But there always seemed to be the hope of redemption around the corner, in the beguiling wonders of the earth – in its plentitude, the awesome beauty of the land and the sea and the 'goodness' that evidently was present in most human beings, such as qualities of valour and kindness and love, though they were often overlaid with ugliness. We were the products of hundreds of generations of sub-human behaviour, self-willed 'sins' against ourselves, our fellow

creatures and against what we called God's Will, modulated by the environment in which each of us had been raised. How were we to overcome this powerful inheritance? How were we to prevent its baleful influences from being passed on to our children and their children?

At the Coombe Springs congress a member asked Bapak for advice: 'Children are now being born to Subud members. Since they are born with the grace of God in them, how can we protect them from the influence of the lower forces?' Solemnly, but with a trace of amusement in his lips, Bapak replied, 'Truly this question arises from the foolish mind of man. If children have God's power in them, then the real question is how they can be protected from us, not how we can protect them!'

Bapak's talks and responses to members' questions contain a great deal of advice on how we might live our lives and raise our children in this material world through the power of the latihan if we could only let it, by deepening submission, patience and sincerity. The explanations and stories were adventitious aids to put our minds at rest so that we would be willing to surrender and let understanding come to us. Some of this advice was strictly specific and particular, some for general application. The specifics in the replies to letters were often so particular that I was afraid we would take them out of context and use them as patent 'remedies' for general use.

Once I asked Bapak's advice on behalf of a couple, friends of mine, each of whom had come separately to me for help in straightening out their rapidly-collapsing marriage. She had fallen in love with a married man and wanted to leave her husband and their little children and emigrate to live near her lover. He was appalled by her readiness to break up their family and enter into a new relationship which had all the marks of prospective disaster. Bapak heard me out and asked (Prio Hartono interpreting), 'Are you an advocate for either of them?' Laughing, I said 'No, I am more an *amicus curiae*, a friend of the court.'

Bapak, graver now, said, ' In these matters, it is best not to make *ex parte* judgements. It is best to hear both sides of the case. Bapak knows these two friends of yours. It is clear to Bapak that you too feel that she is clearly wrong and he is clearly right. Of course she is wrong to abandon her family and follow her passions. But what you don't know is why such a woman as she is, gentle and kind,

should even think of doing this. It is because her life with her husband had been intolerable for a long time. There is a cruel – an almost bestial – streak in him which has distorted their relationship. She is making a mistake by leaving her children and going to this other man. But she cannot continue to live with her husband.'

I asked if I should advise them about this. Bapak said whatever I said would not make a difference even if it came from Bapak. So what did I do? Nothing. Except to tell them both about Bapak's concern for their children's well-being.

I tell this story here to make the point that the realities of our individual lives are so complex and specific to each one of us that I have always tried to separate the specific from the general because I am terrified that I would harm rather than help people in trouble by quoting scripture.

The advice and explanations Bapak gave us in his talks was, of course, for general guidance. Sometimes his observations given in private conversations had value in general application. For instance, when Bapak was visiting my home in Colombo, he told me that if I could afford it, I should give each of my children a separate room. They should learn to spend most of their indoor time in their own rooms, doing their studies, amusing themselves, and joining the rest of the family at play time, meal times, and prayer time. (I realized that if we followed this advice in these extraordinary times, one would have to afford not only a room but also a TV set, a VCR and a CD player for each child!) We were partially successful in following Bapak's advice and believe that our children – and we too – benefited. The point, we could see, was not so much the separate rooms, but quietness in the house in which children are raised and the cultivating of their ability to grow as individuals within a family group.

Bapak once asked me whether I struck my children. I said I had, adding quickly in self-defence, but not often. 'But why do you strike them at all? It is like beating your grandfather,' Bapak had said. That lesson sank deep home and though my children often felt the brunt of my irritable tongue and often unfair judgements, since then they rarely had to encounter physical force from me. One such occasion stands out clear in my memory. I was deep in a game of chess which I was losing. Chess is perhaps the most egotistic of all games because it is not a matching of muscle against muscle but mind against mind – the very seat of our self admiration. My son

Nuryana, then not more than four, was playing nearby with some friends and they were yelling and screaming away as children will in their excitement. Naturally, I blamed my imminent defeat on him and said curtly 'Stop that.' After losing another piece, I realized the noise had commenced again and repeated my order. When it happened a third time, I picked him up angrily and smacked his little thigh. He did not cry. He only looked straight at me very calmly and kept on looking. The look was more eloquent than any protest. It said: 'Okay, okay, I am a little boy and I have behaved badly. But why are *you* misbehaving? You are an adult aren't you? You are in a bad way, father.' Subud children are and seem like any other children but, by heaven, they can come through on occasions like my grandfather.

Bapak has told us over and again that the only way to prevent passing on the influences of our hereditary mistakes to our children – at least to the extent that it usually is – is to receive quietly and prayerfully before we start the sexual act which might result in conceiving a child. It was a piece of advice he invariably gave to young people, especially those about to get married. I realized from my own experience and that of my friends that this advice was most often followed only in the breach. One Subud brother caused loud and prolonged laughter when he asked Bapak, 'But Bapak, suppose after we have received and been quiet in bed we no longer want to? Bapak roared with laughter and waggled his head in sheer disbelief that the question had been asked at all.

Such experiences with Bapak were what made me increasingly appreciate Bapak's role as father, apart from his work as messenger. He had pastoral duties as well which he performed night and day until his last days when he became more and more remote from us, withdrawing into his study, into his prayers, and into his family as all of us do as we grow old and frail. So many valuable lessons were given to us in those earlier days. I recall, with goose bumps still coursing through my skin, an evening in Cilandak when all of us who had gathered there for the month of Ramadan were celebrating *idul fitr*, the end of the fast, with Bapak. He spoke to us for a while about the meaning of the fast and concluded with words which glued themselves on my mind (Usman translating): 'Bapak supposes that you have performed your *Id* duties as well as you did your fasting. You have asked and received forgiveness for the offences you have committed against your friends. That is the easiest

because if those offences had been really bad they wouldn't still be your friends. Then, you may have asked forgiveness from your enemies. That is more difficult but Bapak hopes you have done so. But Bapak is sure that you have neglected to ask and receive forgiveness from those with whom you are married. The most frequent and hideous offences are committed at home and right there in the bedroom. Husbands and wives try to take these offences for granted and so do not think of cleansing their relationship by asking each other for forgiveness even at *idul fitr*.'

Bapak then said 'Now Bapak would like to see you do so now, right in front of Bapak.' Husbands and wives seated in separate parts of the room rushed toward each other in an urgent gasping scramble to beg for forgiveness. I, seeing my wife near the farther door, charged out through the one nearest me to reach her via the verandah. When I got there, she wasn't there, having joined the *melée* to get to where she had last seen me. I felt as if I was in some Kafkaesque nightmare and scrabbled with heavy limbs through the throng until I reached her looking equally helplessly for me. The tears shed in those few moments had a marvellously detergent quality, not of self-pity but of real penitence.

7

Fasting our habits

WHEN Bapak first suggested that I should follow the Ramadan fast which he had recently urged the residents of Cilandak to undertake, I protested that I did not believe in religious ritual. I was very sassy in those early days. I would talk back (as distinct from speak up) even at Bapak, and take a seat alongside him and cross my legs casually without a thought that I was being impertinent and uncouth. Gradually my behaviour in Bapak's presence changed, as intimations of what Bapak might be, touched my understanding. 'It is not a ritual,' Bapak said (Prio Hartono interpreting), 'And it's important to experience fasting.' I still demurred, arguing 'If it is not a ritual why should everybody fast at the same time?' Bapak replied, 'Because it is easier to fast when everyone else is fasting.' Complicated question, simple self-evident answer, as usual.

That evening Bapak spoke to us about the 'true meaning' of fasting. He began with an explanation, a parable of fate and destiny (Usman interpreting): 'God sends us his postmen to deliver what we need to live in this world – a suitable wife or husband, children, a house, a job appropriate to our talents, transport for ourselves and our children. The postman's bag contains all our needs and he is willing to deliver them on time. But, influenced by our hearts and minds, we are impatient and ask for this and that ceaselessly and are dissatisfied all the time. So we thrash about, creating a dense fog of passion around us so that the postman cannot find his way to us. What God wills for us is our destiny. Destiny is what should happen to us. Fate is what *does* happen to us because our hearts and minds, which are influenced by the lower forces, make it difficult for human beings to surrender to God's will for them to reach their destiny. So their lives are ruled by fate rather than destiny … Bapak advises Subud members to fast because when you are not ruled by your appetites, the fog around you becomes less dense and the postman may be able to find his way to you.'

The difference between fate and destiny was an important lesson for me. Fate is what *happens* to us because we are under the dominance of material forces. Destiny is what *should* and *could*

happen to us if we have been able to put the lower forces in place so that the human force uses them rather than be used by them. As a development reporter and a UN official concerned with human development it was an invaluable working principle. Our task, I urged my younger colleagues, was to help people to move their children away from the line of fate to the line of destiny, the most succinct definition of development that I know. And invariably they understood what I was talking about because people in or out of Subud have a primal sense that responds to such an idea. As more and more of us began to undertake the Ramadan fast Bapak gave us deeper explanations of its meaning.

Everything, Bapak said, has an inner and outer. Even a word has an outer meaning and an inner meaning. Even *zakat* – the obligation of philanthropy – has an outer and inner meaning. A beggar stretches out his hand and you give him a rupiah to get rid of him. You have *done* charity with that rupiah. But you have not *been* charitable. *Doing* charity is very different from *being* charitable. All Muslims go to Mecca and they are proud to wear the white cap to which they are entitled when they have become *hadjis*. The white cap indicates that they have become purified of their sins. Bapak smilingly named an Indonesian who was wearing the white cap in the audience and remarked, 'We all know, and he knows even better, how purified our brother is from his sins. He has been to Mecca by Garuda Indonesian Airways. But has he been to Mecca within? There is a Mecca inside all of us which we should visit in our lifetime.'

Also on the subject of *zakat*, Bapak once said, 'Varindra, you like to help people but when you want to help you don't help enough. If a man is drowning thirty feet away you should not throw him an eighteen-foot rope and claim that you have met him more than half way.'

Ramadan is usually practised as an outer ritual – a form of religious behaviour for a set period during which time food and drink are avoided during the daylight hours. There is nothing wrong with this, Bapak said, because it benefits people to change their habitual pattern of life even for one month in a year. They become more aware of the life of the spirit during their working hours. But the benefits of the fast – not just in its dietary aspect but also in its spiritual aspect – are undone by the widespread tendency to eat even more than usual when night falls. The inner meaning of

the fast, Bapak explained, was much more valuable and also more interesting.

Remember, he said, that in ordinary life we all fast for about 13 hours. We eat dinner at about seven o'clock at night and do not eat or drink until possibly eight o'clock in the morning. But most of that time we are sleeping and are therefore unconscious of the change in our bodily and mental states caused by the absence of an intake of food and drink. It is not conscious fasting. The purpose of the Ramadan fast is to become aware of the extent of our habitual dependency on material, vegetable and animal forces.

What do we 'sacrifice' in the fast? What we are stuck on. 'A king,' said Bapak, 'has great lands under his control. It does not mean much to him to give up a bit of it. He needs to give up something he values more, something he thinks he cannot surrender easily such as a little of his power or, better still, his habitual distrust of his ministers!' Then, pointing to me, Bapak said, 'Varindra finds it easy to give up food and water during the fast. But tobacco is not so easy. Even more difficult is reading. Varindra should give up reading books during the fast to know how the habit of reading has got him by his neck.' I protested amidst laughter, 'Bapak I am the kind of fellow who, if he has no book or newspaper to read, will read jam jar labels!' Bapak, joining in the amusement, said 'Yah. Then you'll have to give up jam jar labels.'

There are many inner levels of fasting, Bapak said. The upper, outer layer is fasting from habitual eating and drinking. 'And nowadays, smoking cigarettes!' And looking at the Wilhelm II he was smoking, added, 'Maybe also Dutch cigars!' The second layer of habits from which we should fast are habitual sleep – not sleep which we all need but habitual sleep! And habitual sex. Most people, Bapak said, have sex because it is a habit, or it is the habitual time for it or merely because it is available, not because the inner indicates it. Even deeper than this is the social habits we indulge in so thoughtlessly, for instance, the habit of gossip – useless and harmful tittle tattle that demeans the one who gossips as well as his or her victim.

Bapak said that we, as helpers particularly, should see this tendency in ourselves so that when we meet as a *dewan* we should not use it to pollute the air with 'bad talk'. I suppose the appropriate English word is scuttle-butt. We should be able to see how we have a tendency to enjoy gossip, the juicier the better. I remarked that the

taste of gossip was bitter-sweet. Bapak said yes, it is enjoyable but it leaves a bad taste behind on the tongue.

For instance, Bapak went on, the habit of criticism. Being critical is being intelligent, but being habitually critical is being destructive to both the critic and the criticized. It's a form of violence, Bapak said and, like violence, it does harm to its user and to his victim. As a chronic sufferer from this disease, a critic by nature, by habit and as a professional critic in my trade, every word Bapak was saying sank into the core of my heart. I knew the habit well. I knew its colour – bile green. After a week of Ramadan I knew how clever the material force behind habitual criticism was, how persuasive it was that one was being 'constructive' and 'objective', not malicious and tawdry. Alas, I also learned after repeated experiences of Ramadan, that whatever cleansing had taken place lasted no longer than a few weeks, if that, after the lessons of the fast had faded.

Another social habit, Bapak said, was the tendency to be dismissive of other people, to score easy triumphs off others, to make clever debating points, to put down other people by being smart and glib. Phew. That was even closer to where I lived. Allied to this, Bapak continued, was the habit of wanting to be right, which could be satisfied only if the other was shown to have been wrong. If you are right, Bapak pointed out, there is no need to prove that the other man is wrong because rightness comes from God and does not need any justification by negative proof. Also allied was the habit of being holier than thou. 'You don't need the stripes of a corporal or the star of a general for others to know you are holy. If you need outer symbols of holiness you may get them,' Bapak said, 'but that is all you will get!'

Many years after we began observing Ramadan regularly Bapak told us about the *lailat ul quadir*, the gift of God which those who have fasted sincerely may receive at the end of the month. When in 1972 I went to Cilandak for the fast, Bapak asked me whether I controlled the newspaper I was editing. I said that I had complete control of editorial policy and direction but not the finances. They belonged to the people who owned the stock. Bapak said that it was a pity and that it was time for me to move on. Aghast, I replied that it was not easy to find a job in the upper reaches of journalism. He said, 'You have been a good journalist. Now it is time, maybe, for something else. You should continue to write but your work now is not in editing a newspaper. It should now be wider.'

I went into the fast with a heavy heart. I was enjoying my work and the thought of changing trades was appalling. Also, there were many financial obligations to carry. What was I to do? I was frightened but I knew I was going to do what Bapak had suggested though I did not know how. At the end of Ramadan, I went to ask Bapak permission and blessing to leave. He asked me whether I had received the *lailat ul quadir*, my gift from God. I replied that there was nothing noticeable I had received. Bapak smiled and said, 'People think that the gift of God is like a gift-wrapped parcel that drops from the sky. Surely God is more subtle than that. Very often it is not something that is added to what you have, but something that is taken from you, something you do not need.' I looked a bit bewildered and said I did not understand what had been taken from me. 'How do you feel now about leaving your newspaper? Do you still have fear in you that you will be unable to find the money your children need?'

That was my gift – the freedom from the anxiety I had allowed to enter my heart. I returned to my office feeling confident and clear. In the huge pile of a month's mail there were three offers of jobs. All of them had their attractions and none of them felt right. I cabled refusing them. A day or two later a senior UN officer called to offer me what he called 'a challenge' – to use my journalistic experience, particularly in the developing world, to make people aware of the world's population situation. I had been a severe critic of the population policies being enunciated in Washington, London, Bonn and Stockholm. And the challenge seemed right. I accepted the work and went back to Cilandak to ask Bapak for a spiritual briefing on population problems. It has served me well but that is another story. All I need to say here is that the advice Bapak gave me enabled me to help many powerful people in the field understand that the population 'problem' would not be solved in the uterus but in the human mind, that people would not willingly reduce the size of their families unless they could be certain that the children they already had, had a chance of surviving, and that people would not readily regulate their lives unless their lives were worth living.

The lessons of Subud, praise God, are not airy 'spiritual' fantasies but commonsensical, practical and humane.

8

Matters of life and death

BAPAK hardly ever read a newspaper. I once saw him reading a newspaper as I entered the room, and remarked that it was the first time I'd seen him do so. He grinned, a bit embarrassed, it seemed, as though he had been caught doing something unbecoming and said (in English), 'Bapak was reading the advertisements. They are all lies. But not so much lies as the news.' As a newspaperman, I understood very well. The advertisements were blatant lies, so blatant that the reader was aware of it. But the lies in the news column were subtle, much more subtle, because the reporter was an expert at selecting his 'facts' to fit his particular truth and was often skilled at braiding these preferred facts and opinions so that the reader could not easily tell them apart and took it all in as 'truth'. How often had I opened the eyes of my children as they grew up to detect this professional legerdemain. When she was very young, my daughter Anuradha observed that whenever a reporter starts a sentence with 'In fact,' he is about to give you an opinion. (Journalism schools please note.)

Bapak's inner was profoundly aware of the weight and direction of political trends but he would not clutter his mind with the breathless ephemera of the daily press. He once told me of his awareness of the movements of the nuclear submarines of the US and the USSR playing their deadly war games in the Indian ocean. He said their material vibrations often woke him in the early hours of the morning. He was deeply concerned at the build-up of lethal weapons and asked me about what was going on in the international scene at the United Nations.

I was his Man of the World. He would often greet me with the question 'So what is happening out there?' I told him of the highlights of the political and economic events making the current headlines and Bapak would listen and make comments about what it all meant. One evening when I had arrived in Cilandak from New York, I told him about the first heart transplant carried out by Dr Christian Barnard in South Africa. Bapak was silent for a long time and then remarked (Usman translating) that the world-wide

interest in transplant surgery came from a misunderstanding about the meaning of living and dying. Human beings were being increasingly regarded as mechanical things composed of a multitude of parts which could be repaired or replaced by 'spares' taken from dead bodies of other humans or animals or even wood and metal. The human body and brain were made up of material things but what made a human being different from a mechanical object was the *jiwa*, the human soul which must return to its origin when the body dies. Scientists are very clever people and their surgery is a highly skilled art but they know nothing about death. Death is necessary to life but unnecessary death is unnecessary. So these clever surgeons serve a useful function but they should know about necessary death.

My mind was racing along trying to understand. Bapak seemed to have had his say on this subject, so I told him about the controversy raging between the legal profession and the medical profession about when death occurred. The legal people were sticking to the old theory that death occurs when the heart stops and the medical people were insisting that death occurs when the mind stops.

Bapak began again, 'Usman says that Varindra is alive. Bapak asks why do you say Varindra is alive? Usman says it is because Varindra can hear and see and touch and taste and smell and move and feel the breeze and the heat on his skin. Bapak asks how does Varindra do these things? Because he has ears and eyes, a tongue, nose and limbs and a nervous system. Suppose that Varindra dies at this very moment. He is dead. But his ears, eyes, nose, tongue, limbs and nervous system are still there. You can recognize his features as Varindra's. But he is dead. What is the difference? The power that gave life to these organs is no longer there. The common process of death is that as a human being grows old, this power is gradually withdrawn. The eyes cannot see so well, the ears cannot hear so well, the body does not move so well and so on. And there comes a time when there is no more power to animate the senses and the brain. It has been separated. Sudden death is shocking because it happens without notice!'

After another long pause Bapak said, 'In the case of people who have been touched by the power of God, the ears die but the hearing does not, the eyes die but the seeing does not, the nose dies but the smelling does not, the tongue dies but the tasting does not,

the limbs die but the moving does not. It is not the eyes, ears, nose and limbs that go to the True Human World. They belong to this earth and return to it. What is the use of these clumpy legs and heavy body in heaven? It is the purified seeing, hearing, smelling and moving that leave this earth and return to the origin.'

I recalled a hymn – a 16th century Christian hymn, which a wonderful Subud voice had sung at my daughter's wedding:

God be in my head
And in my understanding
God be in my eyes
And in my looking
God be in my mouth
And in my speaking
God be in my heart
And in my thinking
God be at my end
And at my departing

Bapak nodded as if to say yes, that is it.

Another time, in Calcutta, when Bapak was staying at the marvellous marble apartment on Alipur Road in which Ian and Muftiah Arnold lived for many years, an Indian member asked Bapak, 'What's the meaning of Christ's resurrection?' When the question was interpreted to him Bapak acted as though he had not heard it. He went on puffing his cigar (these were the days when people were not as sensitive as they now seem to be to tobacco smoke) and looked out of the window as if there was a new species of bird sitting on the neem tree outside. I thought that he was going to let that one go by unaddressed, or that he was splaying his inner fingers about to judge if he should answer the question, in that particular audience. Then, smiling, Bapak said (Usman interpreting), 'There is this old Mercedes Benz. Its body is dented badly. It is covered with thick coats of grime. Its tyres are flat and the wheels need aligning. It has no brakes. And above all, there is no spirit. The owner wants to upgrade it.

'He aligns the wheels and puts new tyres on them. He fills the tank with benzene. Then he knocks out the dents. If the Mercedes Benz could feel, it would be a very painful process. Now begins the task of cleaning off the grime. The owner washes the body with

soap and water. There is more grime underneath. He takes a wire brush to it and scours deep. It is quite painful. But after a while something marvellous begins to happen. On each separate part of the Mercedes Benz, from under the grime, appears the name of its maker: MB, MB, MB, MB, Allah, Allah Allah ...' Then Bapak pointed at the person who had asked the question and said, 'Meaning of resurrection.'

Once during Bapak's visit to Marseilles, I asked him one of my off-the-wall questions: 'What happens to a man when he dies?' I remember being ready to be slapped down but not in quite the way it happened. 'Varindra, you as a reporter should learn to ask sharper questions,' Bapak said (again, Usman interpreting). 'What's the point of asking what happens to a man when he dies? Which man? What happens to one man when he dies will be very different from what happens to another man when he dies.' It was now obvious to me that my question was inane and I felt very abashed and hung my head. After a while, Bapak relented and said, 'You are not ready to receive and understand the full answer. But Bapak will tell you something you can understand. A temporary explanation. Bapak will speak in very broad terms and if you speak or write about it you should always point out that it is a broad explanation. An explanation for now, not the whole explanation.

'There are three broad categories of possibilities for human beings after death. The first and the largest category is people who are so completely influenced by the material forces of the earth that when they die, their *jiwas* are so heavily encrusted with material forces that they revert to the material earth along with their bodies.' I must have looked horrified at this prospect not only for them but for myself too – just in case – for Bapak immediately added, 'But there is always God's mercy. One of their progeny, within seven generations, may receive the grace of God and that person's worship would influence the soul of the earth-bound ancestor and enable it to begin progress to the origin.

'The second category is the people who have worshipped God as sincerely as they can. They attend the mosque and church, regularly perform their *shariat* and are referred to as "God fearing" men and women. Their *jiwas* may not be as heavily encrusted by the material forces and when they die, their *jiwas* do not revert to earth but hover about on its surface. These are what people often see as "ghosts". They have two possibilities of redeeming themselves. One

of their progeny within seven generations may come in contact with the Grace of God and this will touch them and set them off on their way to the true human world. The second possibility is rebirth. If a man and woman in a state of being similar to that of the dead person while he was on earth, are entering into a procreative act, the "hoverer" could enter the crucible of that union and become the soul of the child who may be born from it. That child might come into contact with the grace of God in its lifetime and, at death, will begin the journey to the true human world.

'The third category is the smallest and includes Subud members who have received the contact with the power of God. Depending on the sincerity of this person's surrender and the degree of purification reached in his or her lifetime, their soul, when separated from the body, will soon be on its ascendance to the true human world. It will not remain in earth's atmosphere but will go beyond this solar system, making its way eventually to the origin.' Bapak stopped, and feeling the solemnness his explanation had caused in Usman and me, he cracked a joke: 'No guarantees!' And then, he repeated his warning that he was 'speaking broadly' and that this was only a partial explanation. I share this with others in Subud because I must, and I must repeat the proviso that Bapak was 'speaking broadly' and giving only a partial provisional explanation.

Bapak made very few references to dying and death in his public talks. In smaller groups and in private conversations, he spoke about death not as an event but as part of a process, a passage between one life and another. A progression to the true human world or 'paradise'. I once asked him, point blank, whether what he spoke of as the true human world was a spiritual state of being or an actual place in the universe. Bapak replied, 'Ya, it's a place beyond this solar system.' I never raised the subject with him again. His tone sounded so final.

But from the occasional testing Bapak did with us and from hints in his talks and conversations I came to understand that the prevalent notion that life exists only on this planet is one of those absurd enormities of human geocentricity, an arrant piece of anthropoid hubris. We look for life in outer space, in other planets and beyond, but we want to 'recognize' it, to see and hear people like us out there, with a head and facial features, torso and limbs, speaking the languages we are familiar with – even if its sound was electronic like the voices of the Daleks and the Jeddis of science

fiction. Is it not possible that there are other unrecognizable kinds of life? I suppose it is beyond the capacity of our minds to visualize anything beyond its familiar experience just as a person born blind cannot 'recognize' the colour red or blue except in terms of analogy or metaphor. But in spite of that limitation could we not make a leap of imagination and guess that the beings on, say, Jupiter might be composed of light, so clear that they are invisible to our earthly eyes?

It may be the same for 'intelligent' beings on other planets in our own or other galaxies who might be trying to find intelligent life on earth. They must have realized by now that there isn't any. I can imagine a report already filed somewhere out there concluding that the planet Earth is inhabited by small metal bugs on wheels, scampering about feverishly. When the bugs stop for a while, smaller two legged parasites emerge from them and rush about, carrying briefcases or plastic bags and return to their host-bugs which then tear away again. Ergo, there is no intelligent life on that small planet in that small solar system down there. And if they only heard the conversation which took place between two astronauts who landed on the moon and spoke these deathless lines which went very like this, they would have no doubt about that conclusion:

'Gee. Ain't this sump'n?'
'Yeah, ain't it?'
'Ain't this sump'n else?'
'Yeah, sump'n else'
'Ain't it?'

But I babble. All I need to suggest is that unless our inners become clear and sensitive enough to receive the reality beyond, as Bapak's could, we shall never 'know'. We may have to wait for that 'other life' before we can understand.

Bapak explained many times that the other life was a 'continuation of this, not in the same body or form but in quality.' The quality with which we end our lives in this world would determine the quality of the beginning of our lives in the other world. He often even joked about it. Once he did a mime of a well known *wali* or holy man who, when the angel of death whispered in his ear that he was summoned upstairs, he hurriedly clutched at his money wallet to check if it was safe. Another mullah, famous for

his submissiveness to Allah, when told of his impending death, began counting his gold to be sure he would have enough to carry with him to paradise. 'Holiness,' it seems, 'is not the way upstairs.'

One evening in Cilandak Bapak told a few brothers about my asking him about what happened to a man when he died. An Indian member had written asking about 'reincarnation' and Bapak recalled what he had told me about rebirth in this world. 'Reincarnation,' Bapak said (Prio Hartono interpreting) 'is for a very few. If a man's *jiwa* has reached complete purification in this world, he would, at death, return directly to paradise. There, he may come under orders to perform many duties in the universe. He may even be "ordered" to carry out an assignment on planet earth. Then he could incarnate himself in the form needed for the task. He could be born on earth as a Palestinian or as a Javanese or in another form he chose. He would live and die on earth as long as he needed to, and return to paradise.'

We were all weeping silently as Bapak spoke. I remembered Adam. There was no sadness in our tears. Only a quiet joy and gratitude that we were fortunate to hear what he said from his own lips. There was a long silence in which I dozed off (it was nearly midnight). I woke up with a pleasant aroma in my nose. Bapak was fast asleep. So that, I thought, that is the smell of a reincarnated soul.

9

Meanings and origins

THERE must have been something in each one of us, some peculiar bit of genetic character inheritance or learned trait that brought us to Subud. In my case I suppose it was the need to find meaning in my daily life and the myriad events occurring around me and in the alternating feelings of hope, despair, fear, like and dislike, acquisitiveness and detachment which coursed through my mind. The religious 'knowledge' and practices in which I had been raised were never rigorous and demanding. My father was the principal of a small Buddhist school in a village not far from Colombo, the capital of our country. He was a lay leader of the local monastic Buddhist temple but though he performed his public religious duties, he was very relaxed about domestic religious observances.

My mother had been a Protestant Christian until she married my father but she never tried to impose Christian or Buddhist theology on her rapidly-growing brood. She bore and nurtured 13 of us through epidemics of malaria and childhood disorders and did it so well that all of us, my parents included – are alive at this time of writing. In my teens, I used to label myself a Free Thinker. There was more freedom than thinking skulking under that label. And by the time I reached university, I was accustomed to scoff at the mention of God, Brahma, Heaven and Hell and all the attendant beliefs of devout aunts and family elders.

It was predictable, I suppose, that I would gravitate towards Marxism and associate myself politically with faculty members and colleagues who called themselves Trotskyites – not because Trotsky had any relevance to the plight of the people in our country but because he was an enemy of Joseph Stalin. We knew nothing at the time of Stalin's gulags and their brutalities, but we saw his abortive pact with Hitler and the subsequent alliance with imperial France, Britain, and with nationalist China and the United States. This was all the evidence we needed to justify our loathing of him as an opportunist who was betraying Lenin and the promise held out by the great revolution of October 1917 by joining forces with the

oppressors of colonial people. I wrote party pamphlets and had a whale of a time playing at cops and robbers. The Trotskyite party was banned during the war and its leaders jailed, and we claimed to be operating 'underground', the romantic milieu of all youthful rebels against authority.

A small group of us young undergraduates belonged to a training cell headed by a senior English teacher. He had a wide reputation as the party theoretician and as a brilliant literary critic. At the first training class he held at his house, he shattered and impressed us with a startling opening. 'Comrades', he said (how pleasing it was to be addressed thus by such a formidable character), 'Comrades, this country feeds and excretes through Colombo Harbour. We must get control of this aperture.' I did not fancy being a sphincter muscle, but I admired the succinctness of his description of our single channel of economic metabolism. The country had been completely colonised and reduced to total dependency on imports and exports, largely from imperial Britain. Control of movement of goods in and out through organising the big harbour workers' unions would put a clamp on the effort to win the war (this was in the early 40s), a way which we considered to be the last violent gasp of the imperial age – which is what it turned out to be.

My participation in all this underground work was to write the occasional polemical pamphlet and distribute it on my bicycle to whoever would stop to collect it, and I enjoyed the sense of belonging to a party which, in the words of the title of one of Trotsky's policies, was 'against the stream'. It had meaning for me because the pompous panoply of British imperialism present in all its glory in my country had no meaning at all except the intention to make us feel second-class citizens, inferior to the mangiest sales clerk at Millers, Cargills and Whiteways – the great British owned department stores through which post-season garments and other shoddy goods which were unsaleable in London were passed on to the 'native' elites.

But as we got deeper into the fray and into our training, a few incidents occurred that reduced my sense of dangerous elation. Our cell leader once said that we needed a copy of one of Trotsky's works which had been banned by the British government. The only copy, he said, was in the private library of the professor of English who was a friend of ours but not a member of the party. I was

ordered 'to get hold of the copy' for translation into Sinhalese and Tamil. Dutifully, I went to the professor's house and asked to borrow the book. He denied my request saying that his books were his life and he never lent them out. I could read it in his house and work on it if I wished but the book should not be taken out. I thought this was very inconvenient but reasonable and so reported to our leader at the next meeting of the cell. He went into a rage. 'You bloody fool,' he screamed, 'I told you to get a hold of the book, not to borrow it. We need it badly. We must get it by hook or by crook.'

I realized that what he was saying was that I should have simply stolen the book from our friend. The end, evidently, justified the means. The idea that one should use whatever means that would 'work' to attain a desirable end had always troubled me theoretically as a harsh proposition that the imperial powers had consistently used to vindicate their actions. But its full meaning and venomous motive had not struck me forcibly until I came face to face with it as I now did. As time passed, such contradictions in action that claimed to be exclusively virtuous and progressive became increasingly harder to swallow. Though my own lifestyle could in no sense be described as virtuous, I gradually began to recognize the relationship between personal values and public action. This was not being sanctimonious but, rather, a recognition of the truth I came to realize much later, that means *were* indeed ends because they determined the quality of the result attained. A war is won by violence but it only breeds further violence and war. My association with party politics withered away before long because it no longer had meaning for me.

I searched for meaning in my life in religion and in my reading. Religion claimed to have the answers to the question 'why' – the key to the quest for meaning. Why was I born? Why do so many tyrants and crooks thrive in the world while honest and gentle people who care about others suffer intolerably? Why do people fall ill and age and die, many prematurely? But, the religious answers were often given in the form of assertions wrapped in mystery which, we were told, could not and should not be questioned or unravelled. Any attempt to make sense of them – that is, to satisfy the mind – or ask for proof – was seen as an absence of faith.

This attitude repelled me because I wondered how one could have faith in anything one had not experienced and thereby got to know to be true. I asked tacitly and sometimes out aloud – getting

myself into all kinds of trouble – how the priests and gurus, who preached about these assertions of heaven and hell and the mysteries in which dogma and doctrine were wrapped, themselves knew about all this without direct experience of what they were saying. My questions, I was told, were illegitimate because they arose from some dark place in my mind, some black hole of unbelief. Faith, trust and belief in the assertions of the great masters – or rather, as they were reported – was essential if one wished to find an answer to the great question 'why?'

The scientists I knew and had read never addressed that question. They were exclusively concerned with other questions: 'how?' and 'what?' They rejected questions relating to purpose and meaning – the 'why?' questions – as being 'unscientific' since they did not lend themselves to testing by the scientific method of establishing proof through replicable experiment and conclusive 'proof'. And yet, the great scientists such as Albert Einstein seemed to share an attribute of the great religious teachers – the ability to reach beyond immediately provable conclusions, to make a leap of faith. The lesser scientists and those whose scientific knowledge was obtained mostly from paperbacks, newspapers and the goggle box – a category in which most of us belong – seemed to be labouring under the pathetic logical fallacy that absence of proof was proof of absence.

Loren Eisely, American hobo poet and philosopher, whose work is widely unknown, grappled with the same questions in his unfinished book *How Man Came*, and offered some clues which gave some grist to my mind's mill:

'His living organs, his eyes, backbone, his hands and feet – even his remarkable brain – have originated in far places and in different eras of time. He is a mosaic of odd parts drawn together as one might rifle a cosmic junkyard to make a more than usually complicated tin woodman or a scarecrow. Some of the parts have been bent to other than their original purposes, some are obsolescent.

'None of these facts make man unique. All living creatures, because of the changing nature of life, are constructed of similar wandering bits of material strung together by a peculiar little alphabet or set of instructions, a kind of "do-it-yourself kit" which all plants and animals carry in their bodies and pass from one generation to another.

'Man can give names to these processes, lengthy scientific names like DNA, but their wonder remains. In short, we are stardust that somehow assembled itself first into life and finally into consciousness. This implies strange forces in the universe that no amount of naming by man can make ordinary. Man can use terms like evolution and try to position himself in time, but when, behind all these processes, he asks why they are, or come to be, he has reached the borders of science and has entered a realm of thought which can never be tested in a laboratory. This is the realm of what used to be called final questions, the questions asked by the philosopher. We can reason about such questions in a division of thought called metaphysics. Or we may explain them in terms of religious faith. But unlike the domain of science, with its palpable causes and effects which we have come to take as given and to be studied either in the experimental world of the laboratory or the wider, more confusing world of nature, we can only think what we are informed of by our senses. By the nature of things we are denied a scientific answer to the question Why? We can only accept the universe as given and proceed to examine how it seems to operate …'

And when Eisley began to scrape the barrel of his descriptive resources he told a story – the familiar resort of all word people like me: 'The Plains Indians had a favourite story motif and an opening line that began, "Once there was a poor orphan." This was once a true statement of man's condition, and although man has since attained to material riches he is a poor orphan still – an orphan armed with dangerous weapons he has picked up by the wayside that threaten to destroy not the fearsome creatures that once threatened him, but himself. He needs, in other words, another little kit that is studied by genetic instructions not carried in his body. This strange little kit instructs his body how to shape itself. What the orphan now needs for the freedom given him by nature is a new kit of instructions about how to live.

'Man himself must write this book. He has been trying for many ages all over the earth, but he has found the task difficult, and even more difficult the task of observing the rules he has devised for himself. This is part of the problem of being human and an orphan in a world where other creatures go about with another little set of instructions known as instinct, which tell them to be what they are, as for example an otter, a beaver or a serpent. By contrast man has gotten lost in a desert of terrible freedoms. He

does not know clearly what he is and he frequently falls into violent argument as to how to behave. At such time the wise among his kind know that he is still an orphan and that he needs a new instruction …'

The latihan, for me, was a renewal of that 'instruction', the guiding force which was different from 'instinct' and flimsy as it was, seemed to be more whole and more persuasive than the prissy rigors of scientific and logical enquiry which could not give us a hand to help us choose between what Eisley called those 'terrible freedoms'.

There was something in me which was repelled by the aridity of Aristotelian or Cartesian logic. Post-Newtonian physicists and chemists, who reduced the human being to a mechanical contraption of atoms, irredeemably subject to the whims of pervasive material forces operating without purpose, were meaningless to me. I detested their assumption that man was similar to a Model T Ford made up of parts which, when over-used or corrupted, were repairable by skilled mechanics, and replaceable, part by part, with spares. There had to be some other explanation of human existence than was suggested by this atomistic view.

What was there in us that was attracted to painting and music and poetry? What was there within us which recognized truth when we heard it? What was there in us – whatever nation or ethnic group or age-group we belonged to – that was revulsed by wanton cruelty towards vulnerable beings, whether they were humans or animals or insects or plants? What outraged us when we saw unjust discrimination (and I don't mean unlawful), being done in the name of politics, nationality, ethnicity, skin-pigmentation, class, caste and gender? Even those who violated the canons of ordinary decency seemed to have spasms of remorse. Where did this originate?

I recall a story about Alfred Russell Wallace, a young British natural scientist, who set out for the Dutch East Indies in the middle of the 19th century and tramped around the islands looking for explanations of all things great and small. One of his discoveries was that there was a dividing line between the fauna of Australasia and those of Asia. This line snaked between the islands of the Archipelago, even separating Bali and Lombok which were only 15km apart. The fauna of Bali were never seen in Lombok and vice versa. When we were in primary school, our atlases called it Wallace's Line, but it is no longer noted in modern maps. Wallace made a

brilliant guess – that it had something to do with a division in the sea bed. That was long before we knew anything about tectonic plates. He wrote about it in his *The Geographical Distribution of Animals* (1876).

But what he was even more noted for was his 'receiving', during a strong malarial delirium, of the principle of natural selection. He wrote it down on 30 pages of foolscap, tottered to the nearest port of the Moluccas, found a British ship leaving for London, and sent his paper to Charles Darwin Esq., care of the Linnaean Society. Darwin had returned from the Galapagos Islands with a similar theory of evolution but was waiting for corroboration, and here it was, in spadefuls. He read Wallace's letter out to the Society with his own annotations. Later Darwin and Wallace worked together on the theory of human evolution which we loosely call Darwinism.

The point here of my story, and this part of it may well be apocryphal, is that Wallace said to Darwin one day after 12 years of collaborations, 'Charles, we have taken this theory as far as we can. We have developed a defensible theory of the evolution of the physical body of man. But I believe that man is more than his physical body.' To which Darwin's reply was, 'About that, only God knows.' And they parted company. What was that missing element?

When I asked Bapak whether Darwin was right or wrong, Bapak replied (Anwar Zakir interpreting), 'Darwin was right. But his followers were not so right. Darwin was a humble man who believed in the existence and power of God. But his followers did not see that there was a vast gulf between the most advanced ape and the least advanced human being. So they interpolated a "missing link" to bridge the gap,' And Bapak bent towards me in a stage whisper and said, 'This link will always be missing.' He explained that when man's physical body had been 'prepared' the human soul arrived from the true human world beyond our solar system and lodged in that body. That was how Adam was born.

I told this story to Arthur C. Clarke, the science fiction writer, who was a friend and neighbour in Colombo. He had asked me to tell him what Pak Subuh has said about creation and the origin of the species. Arthur heard me out and, as I expected, his only response was a scientific snort. Years later, I saw his *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which the apes touched a monolith that had come from beyond Jupiter and received the impulse which transformed them into human beings. His snort had evidently not expunged Bapak's

explanation from his mind. It had lurked somewhere in its crevices, forgotten by his consciousness as some powerful impressions do, and reappeared much later in the form of his own creative imagining. When I challenged him, jokingly, about plagiarism, Arthur was honest enough to remember the story I had told him.

My interest in meanings and origins that had brought me to Subud and motivated my persistent curiosity about Adam and Eve and evolution, tickled Bapak and he indulged me when he was in the mood. He once told me of a Mexican Subud member who had told Bapak about the 'sighting' of a UFO at a place near Guadalajara. She described how these space-men had landed in their space craft and walked out of it in the full sight of many people. Had Bapak any comments on this? Bapak asked, 'And I suppose these space-men spoke English? Or was it Spanish?' That quip did not quell her curiosity (good for her, I thought) and she looked on at Bapak expectantly. Bapak said, 'If you only knew what this means … you will not sleep of nights.' And did not say any more to her or to me. It seemed to me that although Bapak did not wish to keep anything from us, he was judicious about the time and place at which he let himself go. And he was wary about stirring our imaginative faculties and giving us cause for *akalfikiran*, needless thinking.

But one evening when Bapak was visiting France he was in the mood to talk. It was July 14, Bastille Day, and there Bapak was with about half a dozen of us on the penthouse terrace of a building in Rue Eugene Manuel where he was staying, watching the fireworks bursting in the clear sky. I marvelled at his child-like enjoyment of the star bursts of red, white and blue and the brilliance of the display celebrating a historic liberation from tyranny. My enjoyment of such things is more inward, rather colonial-British, which makes me more British than the British. I expressed myself in a sort of half smile canopied by raised eyebrows. But Bapak was uninhibitedly having a ball. At midnight the fireworks sputtered out and all was still. We sat silently with Bapak in one of those extraordinary spells of quietness – which no one felt obliged to break by chatter, unlike most moments of silence when people feel embarrassed and awkwardly responsible for their inarticulateness.

The silence stretched for five, six, seven, eight minutes and then Bapak said 'Varindra, look out and tell Bapak what you see.' I scanned the skies and said 'Space, Bapak.' 'Yes, space,' said Bapak, 'But it may be not space as you know it. As Bapak is right now, Bapak

can see the whole universe. It is not broken up. It is one, single, intricate machine. Not like the machines you use. Not like your typewriter, Varindra. Or your car. It is more like (and he bent over to Muhammed Usman for a phrase and continued) more like electronic grid or like (he spoke to Usman again) a field of force. This force starts from the origin and moves outward in a circular direction eventually returning to the origin.'

Anxious to seize the moment for a key answer to my constant questioning, I asked, 'What is the point of origin?' Bapak looked a bit exasperated and dismissed the question with a question, 'What is the origin of a circle?' Feeling foolish, I shut up. 'As it moves out, this force condenses into lumps. We call them stars and planets. Each of one of these lumps becomes refined in time and de-lumps itself to be able to rejoin the flow of force and return to the origin. And you Varindra, are a two-legged lump walking about on one of the smallest of these planetary lumps. And you say "This piece of this lump is my country. And within this small lump is a smaller lump called my property." But surely the refining process we call purification is to enable you to de-lump yourself so that, at the end of your life on this lump we call earth, you can rejoin the flow of force on your way back to the origin.'

We were enthralled by the completeness of this parable on our existence, given so clearly, briefly and lightly. It was all there. 'Are you sitting on that chair, or is the chair sitting on you? Are you drinking that whisky, or is the whisky drinking you? Do you own your property, or does your property own you?' There was no call for 'renunciation' there. But there was a call for the appropriate relationship between what I am and what I have. This parable has constantly been with me ever since, as the only explanation of the why and wherefore of life that calmed my turbulent mind. Bapak did not say more that night though I am certain that it was only what he had chosen to say. It was plenty for the time being.

But a few months later, during the month of Ramadan in Cilandak, Bapak talked to us again about creation and the latihan (Usman interpreting), 'Before the universe was created, there was emptiness and God. You will ask how there can be emptiness and something else. But Bapak cannot explain that to you now. If you would, take it from Bapak that there was only emptiness and God. There was no light because there was no darkness. Only emptiness. God created the light. The light was not God but God's creation.

Light is a vibration. That was the original vibration. The vibration of creation. This vibration produced material things. The stars and planets are made up of this materiality which has its own vibrations. Material forces have their own vibrations.

What you experienced when you received the Subud contact, the contact with the great life force, was a contact with the original vibration. When you do your latihan, after long purification, you will be able to distinguish between that original vibration of light and the material vibrations of the earth.'

I felt elated that another piece of the 'explanation' had fallen into place. But, *bismillah*, there was so much more to learn from Pak Subuh, the non-teacher, and I will regret for the rest of my days that I had not taken the trouble to learn enough of Bahasa Indonesian to draw him out when he was in the mood to reveal his experience and understanding. I realize I should not be ungrateful for the opportunities I had to be with Bapak more often than most Subud members, and I know that Bapak told me many things because he knew that I was by nature a communicator and would share them with others. But I might have been better equipped for it if I had taken more trouble.

10

The business of Subud

MANY Subud members, including me, had great difficulty in coming to terms with Bapak's continuous emphasis in our engaging our time, skills and energies on enterprises. Part of my problem was the socialist cast of my mind, which was conditioned to abhor capitalism and its profit nexus as the devil's invention to set up greed as the prime motive force behind our use of the earth's resources and human skills. Despite my early atheism and vociferous anti-religiousness, Gautama Buddha's mordant observation that greed, envy, fear and ignorance were the predominant determinants of human behaviour was – and continued to be – a constant thought underlying my world view. My reading of history seemed to confirm and validate this attitude. It was clear to me that the hideous human toll of war throughout recorded history had been caused by the greed of despots and, later, by private greed organised into businesses which were not accountable to their trading partners but to their stockholders who demanded annual assuagement of their greed for more and more dividends.

As a very young man writing polemical party pamphlets and occasionally writing for magazines and newspapers, I had been given the opportunity to meet Mahatma Gandhi. That was in the winter of 1946 and the meeting was to be in New Delhi at the home of the Ceylon Representative who was my father-in-law at the time. I prepared myself sartorially for the great occasion. I got myself a spanking new suit of Royal Air Force blue from Phelps and Co, the British military tailors and a sober Tootal tie and a breast pocket handkerchief to go with it. On that Sunday morning under the brilliant Delhi winter sky, Mahatma Gandhi was seated on a rattan settee wearing his familiar *dhoti* around his loins with a handwoven shawl covering his torso and shoulders, his stick beside him on the carpet spread on the lawn.

There were about 20 guests standing well away from him offering *darshan* – the respect of their eyes, no one daring to go near, as is usual in Asia where distance is a measure of reverence. As I was taken to be introduced to him, he looked up, saw this vision of

tailored splendour before him, smiled broadly and said in a sardonic tone, 'Oho, one of our smart southern neighbours!' Mahatma Gandhi who had shed his snappy colonial suit and tie many decades before, found tropical colonials clad in British clothes absurd and made no bones about it.

The gawking guests burst into laughter as people do when a great man makes a joke. My face must have gone white with embarrassment. Mahatma Gandhi heard the laughter, saw my discomfiture and immediately took compassion on me. He patted the space on the settee beside him and said, 'Sit down, sit right here,' to make it up to me. I sat in gingerly awkwardness at the edge of the chair, desperately thinking how on earth I was ever going to lift my head again. But, as the smart schoolboy gets out of a jam by asking an intelligent question, I produced one to get out of my predicament. 'Gandhiji,' I said, 'All of us in Asia are soon going to be free because of your work. If you had one piece of advice for all of us, what would it be?' His face purpled in a sort of sad seriousness and he looked down at the carpet for a few seconds, then he looked up at me, smiling that beautiful toothless grin of his, and said, 'Reduce your wants and supply your needs.' And then he added, perhaps unnecessarily, 'Our needs make us vulnerable enough. Why increase our vulnerability?'

Those extraordinary words have lodged in my head ever since as a permanent part of its furniture, although like many Asians, I cannot say that the brunt of the advice has been followed in my life. I have indulged my 'wants' far beyond my needs as my income has increased over the years. But the power of Mahatma Gandhi's words has never dimmed in my consciousness. It was very much in tune with the sub-continental ethos of renunciation of material attachments which bind us to the earth. Mahatma Gandhi had made it an essential feature of his own lifeways. It also proved to be a tremendous political strategy. He had proved the truth that real power comes not from what you *have*, but from what you *are*, that the less and less you have, the less vulnerable you are to the power and blandishments of the forces set against you. The British government could get no leverage at all on him to bend him to their will. He had no estate they could confiscate, no house, no automobile – nothing at all except his loin cloth and chappals, and he would have readily parted with those if they had demanded them. He did not even set great store by his personal liberty which he was so often

willing to surrender in prison for the sake of the freedom of his country.

The only 'greed' he had was for independence from colonial rule. He destroyed the mightiest empire in history without the use of a single gun and started the astonishing domino process of de-colonisation which changed the world in a quarter of a century. And when he had accomplished that, he refused to accept political appointments in free India, and even the honours they offered him as the father of independent India.

Another great Indian, Jawaharlal Nehru, was very different from Mahatma Gandhi. He rejected many 'Gandhian' values – even non-violence, the most precious gift from the Mahatma. But he too shared the loathing of material values as the measure of human worth. I once asked him one of those blunt questions I often asked as a journalist to get an interview going. 'Prime Minister, why do you hate the Americans?' He reflected on this for a while, refusing to make a kneejerk response and said, very quietly, 'I do not hate the Americans. Not at all. I have neither time nor inclination for hate. But I have some difficulty in coming to terms with the crassness of some of them.'

He then told me of his being given a great banquet by a group of American businessmen during his first visit to the United States. The president of US Steel at the time was the chief host and said in the course of his toast, 'Mr Prime Minister, the measure of our great admiration and regard for you is that round this table are the heads of corporations representing more than fifty billion dollars.' He may have been free of hatred but Nehru was by no means free of moral finickiness and, though he was a modern Indian raised in the values and attitudes he learnt at Harrow and Cambridge, the contempt for money and being measured by quantitative criteria rather than by quality, seared his mind. I asked, 'Do you think that the president of US Steel represented the values of all, or most, Americans?' He said 'Not at all. American people obviously have more civilized values. Their literature and art prove that.'

Such attitudes to business – particularly big business and its anti-human relationship towards people, such as the hiring and firing of workers without a qualm in the interests of profits and 'efficiency', which was a way of making more profit – were very much in accordance with my own long-set ideas. The result was that when Bapak spoke about enterprises, an automatic cut-out in my mind

began operating, not only because it was unpalatable to the conditioning of my mind, but also because I was loath to let myself harbour any negative thoughts about Bapak.

I realized that he had been advocating enterprises from as long ago as 1959, at the first world congress held at Coombe Springs. In response to questions from a group, its chairman, Sir Victor Goddard, a Subud stalwart of the time, asked Bapak for guidance about the conduct of Subud enterprises. Bapak said; 'Although money-making may be included in the field of our activities and although to all outward appearances this may be just the same as any other similar concerns, in reality it is quite different. In the ordinary way it is the nature of those who are engaged in making money to be dominated and influenced by it, whereas we, when we work with money are not overpowered by it, but are its masters, and it is we who have power over it.' (*Subud and the Active Life*.)

I could understand easily that it was necessary for business people in Subud to set up enterprises to produce funds for Subud education, health and other human welfare purposes. I told myself, 'fair enough, but not for me'. I was no businessman, I was a writer and I would stick to my pen, and a percentage of whatever I made from my work I would give to Subud. But when in later years the emphasis on Subud enterprises became more vocal and frequent, I watched with growing alarm how everyone felt impelled to become entrepreneurs. So poets began businesses, which collapsed after a few stumbling steps and businessmen began to write bad poetry.

Bapak had told a story at the congress about a farm in Indonesia which was failing until it was taken over by a Subud member called Karjo, who made it work because the material, vegetable and human forces in him were able to get the farm working properly. His reward was the hand of the owner's daughter. This was promptly – and perhaps inevitably – taken to mean that because we are in Subud, whatever we put our hands to would go well. Some of us plunged into real estate with no knowledge at all about land values and land laws; some, who couldn't tell the front of a cow from its behind, became livestock farmers; some set up factories with little capital and no knowledge of the rigours of cash-flow. It was all going to be like Karjo and the owner's daughter's hand was a cinch.

But what we had not heard was the rest of Bapak's explanation: 'We cannot obtain money from God because money is a human factor and is made by man, not by God. Therefore, if we look to

God to provide us with money, we may not get any, for God has never created it. It is clear that when man needs money, it is through other men, through human agency, that he must obtain it. However, the most important thing in our lives here is that we should be able to allow the various powers in us to work properly and to make proper use of them; that we should know how these forces work and operate in us.' (*Subud and the Active Life*.)

Bapak once gave us a quick explanation of the power that material things have over us. He said (Prio Hartono interpreting), 'Here is a piece of blank paper. It has no value. The four of you here agree to give it some value. You say, let us decide that this piece of paper is worth one hundred dollars. You have *created* value with your minds. But the following week, you are fighting over this paper. The thing you yourself created now has power over you, enough to make good friends fall out.'

My scepticism about enterprises was mitigated by Bapak's explanation that the working principle of business should be that both the seller and the buyer should be equally satisfied. This meant honesty and clarity in all our transactions and, above all, no hype, and no 'spiritual' fancies about any special providence for Subud members doing business. I began to hope that Subud enterprises would set new standards of integrity in business, that there would be examples of capitalism with a human face, where success in commerce would go hand in hand with social justice for everyone concerned, because the ultimate purpose was to free Subud members from dependency on the iron whims of some faceless gnome in Zurich, Wall Street, or the City of London, and produce sufficient resources for Subud education, Subud health facilities and other human welfare programmes.

It did not take long to realize that I was counting my chickens long before they were hatched. There was much more for all of us to learn. And it has been a very painful and expensive learning process. I learned, for instance, that the material forces of this earth are not waiting passively to serve Subud enterprises. They are not queuing up with buckets of cement and sand to pour into a Subud building site.

Bankers are not twiddling their thumbs impatiently waiting for a Subud entrepreneur to come along asking for a loan to finance a business. Politicians and central bankers do not take into account Subud enterprise needs with their calculations when they decide to

change exchange regulations or devalue currencies. On the contrary, the material forces are actively opposed to allowing Subud enterprises to thrive. They liked the way business was done in the familiar market place with its 'I'm all right, Jack' values and its penchant for increasing consumerism by constant, strident appeals to man's greed. 'You have a 1988 Ford? Get rid of it and buy the new, bigger and shinier 1989 model,' and so on – the hype that assails our eyes and ears every moment of the day and night. Subud enterprises, run as Bapak described them and for the social purposes for which they were intended, were highly undesirable to these forces and they did their damnedest to plague them. We, for our part, made openings for these inimical elements to do their work by quarrelling among ourselves and by using spiritual imagination rather than our minds to make business decisions.

We wondered why the businesses suggested by Bapak himself were not assisted by the good angels. Why did they not provide the money, the steel and the sand to prevent us over-shooting estimates by delays in financing? Why did they not warn us that the Indonesian government was going to devalue the rupiah so that we could have timed that foreign bank loan to our advantage rather than cause us to suffer a 40 percent loss overnight? It took a long while for us to begin to understand that business was not the angels' business, nor was it Bapak's. Bapak was our spiritual guide, not our business manager. Bapak was concerned with the well-being of Subud members and could 'see' a project ahead of us, a bank, a hotel, a conference centre, a development programme in the thick rainforests of Kalimantan, and he would tell us about it, urging us to take advantage of the opportunity he had foreseen for our benefit. It was up to us to find our way towards it, to make it real. It was up to us to put together the brains, the skills and the means to give his vision form and substance.

Apart from the intrinsic value of increasing the resources of the brotherhood for members and their families in terms of Subud 'development' – schools, hospitals, homes for the ageing and disabled who needed care – it became increasingly clear to me that Bapak had another purpose in pressing us to go into enterprises. This was to get us to use our minds for that sort of productive work instead of thinking about spiritual matters and into 'organizing' Subud. Over the years many of the disputes within the brotherhood had been caused by a few members who had good brains and no work

to use them on. 'Working for Subud' became their full-time occupation. They felt very virtuous about their indefatigable dedication but had not the slightest suspicion that they were doing any damage to themselves as well as to the brotherhood. Engaging these energies in enterprises was one way of preventing this while deploying them for a purpose beneficial to everyone.

After the second London congress in 1983,1 called on Bapak to receive my marching orders. I asked him about the purpose of Anugraha, which had not been completed as a conference centre then as it had originally been intended. I pointed out that even if it had been completed, we would still have had to resort to the giant tent we had used to accommodate 3,000 members. Bapak said (Sharif Horthy interpreting) that we needed a conference hall not only to raise funds for Subud and for a centre where Subud members could use for their meetings but also as an attractive place where Subud and the world outside would 'interface' in a way that was useful to both, where non-Subud people would realize that Subud was not one of those other-worldly cults devoted to mystic concerns.

Subud members, Bapak explained, should be interested in *this* world as long as we are in this world because the quality of our lives in the world hereafter would be determined by our lives here and now. Bapak said the latihan was all we needed to do for our inner life. Our hearts and minds should be deployed for the improvement of our outer life. That is why, Bapak added, in old times people's minds and energies were used to build churches and temples and mosques. I asked, 'Anugraha, then, is our mosque?' Bapak replied smiling, 'Yes, only more useful.'

11

A star at the window

PEOPLE have come to Subud for all sorts of reasons and non-reasons. If you took a microphone around to each member in a group – as I have done – and asked, 'How did you come to join Subud?' nearly everyone will begin, 'It was very strange …' or 'It was a funny coincidence …' In the beginning many of the people who came to Subud were 'seekers' looking for a way to live their lives with less gormlessness than they had been able to find in books and in their workaday experience. Some were refugees from religious dogma and trumpery ritualism. Others – like me – had been members of ways and systems which they had followed as far as they could, and had turned to Subud when they found themselves up against an impenetrable blank wall.

Still others came for 'faith healing'. Eva Bartok's 'miracle cure', sensationalised in the London press and in *Paris Match*, induced hundreds to seek the help of the Miracle Man from Java. One of them was Soraya, the Empress of Iran, who wanted a meeting with Bapak to ask him to intercede with the Almighty so that she could produce a male heir to the Peacock Throne. (Bapak said it was 'up to God' and she lost interest and eventually her throne.) Another, a frequent customer of health spas, joined Subud to lose weight. (He still frequents fat farms.)

Some others had been persuaded, prevailed upon by a friend or teacher they respected, to receive the contact in Subud. Many had read John Bennett and later, Ronimund von Bissing and Edward van Hien, the first of several Subud authors. The chapter on Subud in Jacob Needleman's *The New Religions*, published during the Maharishi explosion of the 60s, brought many Americans to the latihan. I suspect that George Lucas, the writer-producer-director of *Star Wars*, had derived the idea of surrendering to The Force from the Subud members he worked with. It was done tongue-in-cheek but it was respectful and knowledgeable in the same way as Needleman was, though neither Lucas nor Needleman ever joined Subud.

Most people attributed the reason for their joining Subud to coincidence – or as the Americans felicitously call it – happen-

stance. I never believed it. Coincidence is not necessarily meaninglessly random. I have always thought that we were all *brought* to Subud by one means or another – coincidences, brief encounters or seemingly casual happenstance. Peter (Lester) Barrett, who was on an ocean liner sailing from London to Rio de Janeiro to meet Yma Sumac's voice tutor, found a copy of John Bennett's *Concerning Subud* in the ship's library. He realized that he needed things other than his voice repaired and took the very next ship back to London to receive the latihan. The coincidence of that book being in his ship's library and that he should decide to choose it when his own preoccupation – even obsession – was on something very physical, seemed to me to be no accident.

Even the 'reason' given by the man who came to reduce his adipose tissue was not absurd. There was something already within him that moved him in the direction of Subud. Even those who soon dropped out of doing the latihan had been brought to Subud for a purpose. John Bennett gave Subud a footing in the West and went his own way. But many of us who had come to Subud through his instrumentality have now been practising the latihan for more than 30 years. There was a disabled New Yorker who came to the Subud house in a wheelchair to get his legs 'fixed'. He walked out after his opening, leaving his chair behind. He never returned. When Francis von Kahler telephoned him some months later to ask him about his health and to seek a contribution for a new Subud house the man said, 'Ah yes. That place on East 21st. Yes. It did me good. I'll put a cheque in the mail today. Oh, by the way, could you arrange to have that wheelchair returned to me? … I have an appointment, must run.' He must be running for some reason, I suppose.

What amazes me is not the mystery of why and how people came to Subud but why we stay in Subud in spite of all the tribulations we have encountered in our lives. All the early propaganda (which Bapak constantly warned us against) about miraculous cures and the spiritual 'protection' from all sorts of pain and suffering have proved to be disappointing. Subud members have been subject, like everyone else, to fatal motoring accidents, they have been victims of cancer and other ravaging diseases, and some of them play petty power games over other members as 'normal' people do in their offices and social associations

All we have is the latihan. We have no grand architecture – great cathedrals and mosques and stupas decorated by the Old Masters of

painting and sculpture; we have no great 'theatre' – ornate basilicas, brocade costumes, intricate liturgical ceremonies, sonorous organ music and chorales … We go twice a week to a cramped leased space in some ordinary building (I've just done two latihans among the word processors and calculating machines in a secretarial school where the Subud group in Austin, Texas, meets) and, dressed down rather than up in our Sunday best, we close our eyes, make funny movements and utter extremely unmusical sounds for half an hour and go back home. And we have gone on doing this for years and years. Now even Bapak does not visit us to give us that lift we enjoyed occasionally over the years. And we still go on. Why?

The answer I have given to myself is based on something Bapak told us at the very beginning of Subud's coming out of Indonesia into the world. He said that ancient people who worshipped God relied on their capacity for faith. They were less complicated and less caught up in material existence. Modern men and women need to worship in a way that gives them 'proof'. The proof lies in the palpable experience of the latihan: the vibrations felt in the body and on the skin and the movements we make that arise from within, when the mind ceases 'by itself' to direct us.

Bapak once told me that when someone interested in knowing about Subud kept on asking questions ad nauseam, I should say clearly to him, 'Enough talking; now experience. Then we can talk more if you like.' But that after experience, his questions would be different. More real. Bapak said, 'It is like the experience of eating a mango. If you tell someone who has never eaten a mango that the arumanis mango is the best mango in the world he would ask you what makes it so special, why is it better than Indian or Sri Lankan mangoes and on and on interminably. But if you give him an arumanis mango and he likes its taste and texture, his questions will change or, maybe, he will have no more questions.'

Someone present asked 'But, if someone said that he had experienced the same sort of vibration as in the latihan from a different source than Subud, maybe in Africa or India, what then?' Bapak replied, 'Then what? *Sama sama*. If the experience is the same what's the problem? Subud does not claim a monopoly of the power of God.'

That, then, is it. It is the ability to experience the latihan and to put ourselves in a state of willingness to experience it time after time that gives us proof of its reality. That is why I have continued

in Subud. After a while it becomes a part of us, as much a part of us as our skin and bone. It is *there* – beating its flimsy butterfly wings inside us whenever we let go of our minds even for a moment. That is why it is unthinkable for me that anyone could 'leave' Subud. It would be like leaving oneself.

But our minds look for more proof – apart from proof of the reality of the latihan. We look for proof in its effects on our work, and in our relationships with our families and with others in society. I have been lucky to find that evidence outside myself, since I have spent my life writing and I can detect significant changes in it over the years, which I cannot honestly attribute to biological maturescence or increasing worldly 'knowledge'. I make a simple balance sheet: what has improved in my work, I credit to the latihan. What hasn't, I charge to myself. Often Bapak has asked us to 'let it' work in our daily lives so that the latihan is reflected in the way we act and behave, and show up in our 'culture'. The key words for me are to 'let it'. And then there is outward proof of the effects of an inner process. And one day, I fervently hope, we shall be able to give the world the proof it demands in the form of Subud hospitals, schools and businesses, and good and able people running them.

As for me, questions never ceased even when I was given scintillating explanations. As a professional disbeliever and a chronic doubter it seemed I needed more frequent 'proof' than almost anyone else. I was fortunate enough to have ready access to Bapak and to ask him all my questions. I had wonderful children, I had work which suited my talents, I could earn what money I needed and I had the latihan. What more could I want? I wanted renewed reassurance from time to time that Subud was what Bapak said it was – a fresh gift of the power of God sent to help human beings to avoid being overwhelmed by the material forces which were omnipresent in this world. In my peregrinations as an international journalist and as an international civil servant, I saw the ubiquitous power of weapons and money and the internecine power-plays among cultured people such as academics, politicians, business leaders, social workers. No one seemed to be interested in human values in action but only in the 'do-able' and cost-efficient, whatever the human price.

Seeing how pervasive this material power was, I often wondered how the latihan I felt tingling across my pate and on my skin and in my blood, this 'force' which seemed to have the tensile strength

of gossamer, this grace from God which joined Subud members together in a web of brotherhood and sisterhood – the smallest spiritual movement in the world, no more than six or seven thousand active members, at best, scattered in fifty different countries – would make any difference. I went to Bapak as often as I could, every month, even oftener in the early years, to recharge my spiritual batteries and my confidence. I often went into the Big House with a craven dispirited heart and came out feeling on top of the world – a Subud member armed with the latihan in his inner, ready to confront the world again. But I wanted more proof of who Bapak was and of the cosmic place of Subud.

The proof was given on two blessed occasions. In 1969, I lived in Singapore while my wife Lestari lived with our son, Imran, in a tiny two-roomed apartment in the back of the Wisma Subud compound in Cilandak – a 'temporary' line of tenements appropriately called Skid Row. Bapak had advised Lestari not to live in Manila where my headquarters were or in Singapore – where we had rented a beautiful home – because he felt that she was too sensitive to live in 'heavy' places. I was evidently coarse enough to handle it. I asked what we should do with the house we had furnished. With a grin and a chortle, Bapak said, 'You furnished it for Bapak to stay in whenever he passes by Singapore.' Once a month I was able to visit my family and, occasionally, I would ask Bapak's permission to borrow my wife for a shopping trip to Singapore. But it became intolerably lonely especially on the week-ends. One Friday afternoon, returning from the *Straits Times* to my empty house, I could not face it; I told my driver to take me to the airport and set off for Jakarta.

I arrived unexpected in Cilandak at about eight o'clock and saw Lestari and our little boy running up to greet me while I paid off the taxi. She told me that Bapak had popped into our place not five minutes before to ask if I was due that evening. She had said I was not coming back for another week. Bapak had said, 'But that is very odd. Surely Varindra knows it is Bapak's birthday tomorrow?* And he's not going to attend the party Bapak is giving at his house?' All this had been said in a joking tone but we had learned that Bapak's jokes had a serious purpose which we were able, if at all, to decode

**Honestly, I am not a birthday person and had forgotten all about it.*

only later. Lestari said that Bapak was due to talk to the men later that evening and I had arrived just in time.

Bapak seemed pleased to see me, invited us all to the birthday party and spoke for three hours about death. That was the evening when he said we should 'learn to die to things before they die on us,' a lesson I have found profoundly valuable, especially in dealing with the reality of the death of my wife, and the cosmic event of Bapak's own death on earth. That was also the evening when Bapak made a curious statement, again using me as the butt for it. 'Varindra travels all over the globe and knows the world well,' he said. 'It is necessary to know this world. That is why you are here. But when Varindra dies and his *jiwa* is separated from his body, it will experience its new freedom and then say to itself, "Ah ha, but I have not yet been to Alaska. I must get to know Alaska. Only after seeing Alaska can I leave this earth".

None of us understood it fully but none of us took it literally, and, reader, I hope you will not either. Alaska was only a remote place, the name of which had popped into Bapak's mind as he spoke. But 'getting to know Alaska' became a private joke for Lestari and me as we traipsed around the world through Latin America, Russia, China, Africa, Canada, India, Australia and scores of other places.

Back in our little hidey hole, I reported Bapak's talk to my wife. Then we made love and turned over, back to back as we usually did, to sleep. It was about three in the morning. Hardly had we closed our eyes when the room was flooded with a bright light through the small open window that Abdullah Pope had made for Lestari only a few weeks before. I heard Lestari say, 'Varindra, Varindra, look, look!' I turned over and saw something extraordinary happening. There were trees just outside with a 20 foot-diameter circle left open by the foliage, and into this circle a bright light was streaking in from far away. As it reached the circle it stopped, apparently adjusting itself to occupy the very centre, and began to flash its light at us. It could have been 20 feet away, or two miles away or 200 million miles away; it had no relationship to perspective, it seemed. It was a many-sided star, looking about 18 inches deep and wide. It was so translucent and the light, bright as it was, was so soft that it did not dazzle us, so that we could see clearly its farther points. I glanced at my watch by habit, as a reporter will. It was three twenty. We watched it, hardly daring to breathe.

After a while Lestari whispered, 'What is it? Is it what they call a UFO? or is it a message?' I whispered back 'It must be a message for Bapak. A birthday greeting.' After half an hour Lestari said, 'It is Erling Week's turn at being watch-man tonight. Why not call him so that he too can see it? Clad only in my sarong, barebodied, I ran out to find Erling somewhere in the compound. I was sure I would, since Erling does everything thoroughly and he would still be up and about. But he was nowhere to be found. I saw a light burning in one of the guest rooms and rushed to the open window to see a young Italian, who never had seemed to need any sleep, Iying on his bed with one leg trailing on the floor, fast asleep with Erling's flashlight in his hand. He had volunteered to take over Erling's watch and fallen asleep. Try as I did, I could not wake him.

I did not want to miss any more of the star and was running back when I met an Indonesian, also a tenant of Skid Row. I said 'Mas, look at that,' pointing to the star, which I could see over the low roof. 'Where? What?' he said wagging his head. I realized he could not see what was plain to me and bid him *selamat pagi* and rejoined my wife. The star was still there flashing its message.

Of course there was no sleep for us that night. In the morning we waited anxiously for the Big House to open so that I could tell Bapak about our experience. At about eight o'clock we saw Pak Usman walking towards Bapak's house for his daily orders, and I joined him. Bapak and members of his family were supervising the rearrangement of the living room for the evening's party. Usman and I offered Bapak our *sunkum* and wished him well on his birthday. Bapak offered me a seat and, after a while, in a rather stern tone asked '*Apa?*' I sobbed out my story, Usman hardly able to follow my tripping words to translate them. He had another difficulty. He was weeping as deeply as I was. So were the family. Tears without a twinge of sadness. Tears of awe and wonderment. Cleansing, inspiring tears. Bapak alone remained stern.

A moment or two after I finished, Bapak said, still in that stern manner, 'Yes. It was a message for Bapak.' Then he added, 'Don't you go and write about this.' I felt suddenly terrible, as though inveterate reporter that I was, I had snooped into something that I had no business in, that I had invaded Bapak's privacy. I mumbled '*Minta maaf*, Bapak,' apologetically and slunk away thinking that Bapak had warned me not to send cables all over the Subud world saying, 'Star of Bethlehem sighted again,' or some such sensational inanity. I was

hobbling down the back steps in a sort of shame when I heard Bapak's steps. He had walked to the top of the flight and now he smiled. 'You may tell your friends about it,' he said, making it all right for me again.

The message was for Bapak but it had appeared at my window I figured, because I was Bapak's messenger boy. When I told my friends Sudarto, Brodjo and Prio my story, Pak Darto laughed uproariously and said, 'So? You are the great disbeliever in miracles. So you are given extraordinary proof. And in case you disbelieved that too, your wife was there to corroborate it!'

On another occasion in Cilandak, I had a dream in the early hours of the morning. I saw points of light, like little stars on the ceiling which I knew was the sky. I counted them. There were 40. The dream seemed to last a long time but did not move and change. The 40 lights twinkled away without revealing their meaning. All I experienced was a sense of calm happiness and a suggestion that it was somehow important. That morning I told Bapak about my dream. He closed his eyes and received for a long time so strongly that I could hardly bear it so that I broke again into a spasm of tears. Bapak said (Prio Hartono interpreting), 'This is an experience of what will happen when Bapak dies. There will be 40 Subud members around the world who will attract people to Subud and will have earned the trust of Subud members because they understand the importance of surrendering to the will of Almighty God and the meaning and purpose of Subud. Seven of them will be from Indonesia. The rest will be from many other countries. They will be able to recognize one another. It will be like a *dewan* when Bapak is in the other world'.

Lestari and I resolved we would not tell this story at that time except to our closest friends. We were afraid that if it was widely known many would begin tagging people with stars, and some helpers who had spiritual ambitions would make a play to become one-star generals. Besides, we felt certain at the time that Bapak would outlive all of us and that the 'stars' would be not any of us then alive but possibly our grandchildren and their children. I tell this story publicly now *not* because I think the danger of it being misused and misinterpreted has passed, but only because now that Bapak is no longer with us, I feel I have no right to keep it from my brothers and sisters to do with it as they will.

Both these experiences with stars associated with Bapak and

with the brotherhood of Subud have already given me what I needed most – the conviction of Bapak's greatness and the reassurance that, despite the scattered evidence pointing to the contrary, all will be well for Subud, *insh' Allah*, since it is God's will that will prevail, not ours.

12

A world without Bapak

AS the 31 years since I received the Subud contact from Bapak at Coombe Springs in Kingston-on-Thames passed by, there was a constant sense of joy in my being that we, the first generation of Subud members, were especially blessed by living on this earth at the same time as Muhammad Subuh. Whenever we spoke to one another of this feeling, we wondered what it must have been like to be living in Bharat (India) at the time of Gautama Buddha or in West Asia at the time of Jesus and Muhammad. Apart from being able to see and hear and touch Bapak from time to time we were conscious of belonging to the generation of practitioners of the latihan who did not have to rely on the scriptures written and published later, to try and understand the sense and weight of his explanations directly.

We were in his physical presence as he spoke so that we had the advantage of seeing the expression on his face changing from gravitas to joviality and hearing the modulation of his voice from directness to irony or lightness, and to appreciate the meaning in the pauses, which no grammatical punctuation can convey. And we could understand the intention in his gestures which, of course, were never recorded on film because it would have been profanely uncouth to have flashed electric bulbs and photographed him in the state of receiving he was in when he gave us his talks.

And, most of all, the vibration of his voice would touch our inner ears when we were able and willing to 'let go' of the effort to seize meaning with our brains, so that even those of us who knew no Bahasa Indonesia would sense the benefit of what he was saying without it being mediated through the mind.

Yes, we were enormously lucky to inhabit this planet and raise our children at the time of Muhammad Subuh's earthly existence. But we were also full of rubbish. Aware of the extent, depth and variety of that rubbish in my own life, the Doubting Thomas in me questioned why, if this coincidence of lifetimes was indeed a blessing, it should have been vouchsafed (what a marvellous old word, that!) to me, a man with a barrow full of garbage to get rid

of before I could possibly deserve any spiritual blessing at all, let alone such a special good fortune. My mind often jeered at my sense of wonderment that I was able to see Bapak and talk with him, pointing out that Bapak himself had often said that he was 'an ordinary man,' that he was not a Teacher, nor a prophet, that he was 'only' the bearer of a message, that we should never forget that it was to God, not to Muhammad Subuh, that we should be grateful for the blessings of the latihan.

As a journalist and as a Sri Lankan, I could detect what was distinctly Javanese in Pak Subuh as a physical presence and in his modes of thinking, his relationships with his extended family, his idiom and metaphor which came from a feudal agrarian society, his cultural allusions to the Mahabaratha and the Ramayana which had been assimilated into ancient indigenous archipelagic lore, quite distinctive from the way they had been internalised by the Thais, the Burmese, the Indians and the Sri Lankans who also had been influenced by those classics. What was essentially discernible as Indonesian in Pak Subuh often stood in the way of my wish to regard him as a man living above and beyond the limitations of national and cultural boundaries. He evidently 'knew' the essence of other cultures and could distinguish between their effect on the behaviour patterns (how does an Englishman walk, how does a woman from Solo greet her husband?) and the mores of people all over the globe. I marvelled to observe how Bapak's own movements changed in a subtle way as he travelled – a slight loose-limbed swagger in California, a subtle stiffening of his gait in London, a clear formality in a tea-house in Japan, a relaxed homeyness in Colombo when he was nearer Jakarta.

But when the Paris group took Bapak to the ballet, some of them were a little put out that he did not seem to enjoy himself as all of us had. When they asked me why he had not applauded, my riposte was to ask why the ballet company had not applauded Bapak for taking time to see them dance. But even as I said this, I felt it was just a glib *mot* from a loyal courtier and not a helpful answer from an older brother. I should have said I don't know, let us ask Bapak, and I did not because I too had noticed the Javanese gentleman being uncomfortable with the unfamiliar. In the early days when Bapak used to speak about the way Subud went abroad from Java – how a 'French Countess' had offered the money for Bapak to go to Malaya and from there to the West – I smiled

affectionately at how Pak Subuh, the 'assistant book keeper from Jakarta,' as he referred to himself; was displaying the testimonials he had received from the rich and the mighty.

All this baffled me, not much but enough to prevent me from suspending my disbelief altogether. It took many years of being with Bapak and doing the latihan for me to understand that Bapak too had – and was entitled to – an inner and an outer like all human beings. He had been incarnated as a Javanese and his *jiwa* was lodged in the body of a Javanese who was an Indonesian in the same way that I was a Sri Lankan. There was Pak Subuh, the Indonesian (who insisted on making the first national contribution as an Indonesian from his own pocket to an international undertaking), and there was Bapak the messenger with a *jiwa* wide enough to contain all of us and the multifarious ambiences in which we Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims and even the agnostics and atheists among us had come from.

At the time when President Sukarno was trying to make Indonesia the capital of the world – his cartographers were instructed to move zero meridian from Greenwich to Jakarta, and he had taken Indonesia out of the United Nations, determined to establish a United Nations of the New Emerging Forces (UNNEFO) in Jakarta or Bandung – Bapak remarked that this sort of chauvinism was retrogressive politics influenced by Sukarno's unbounded *nafsu*. He explained to a small group of us at Cilandak (Prio Hartono interpreting) that when a baby is born it is only concerned with its own needs and comforts, and cries constantly for attention. The baby is hungry or cold or too hot or wet and demands immediate attention. As it grows up the baby 'recognizes' its mother and father and its siblings, the whole family. Later the child recognizes himself or herself as a member of a community, a village or a small area of a town. Later still, as a member of a cultural-linguistic group, or a state as in India, and then as a citizen of a nation.

There most of us are stuck. Nationhood, Bapak said, is not an end, it is a stage of political and spiritual evolution. We all belong to one human race, whatever our outer distinctions. That is why God has sent the latihan to human beings, this time with the possibility of the contact with the Great Life Force being transmitted from person to person across national, cultural or economic barriers so that one day all human beings will realize that in their inner being they are all relations of one another. Bapak then pointed to me and

said, 'Varindra gets into trouble with his government because he does not believe in the theory of MY country, right or wrong. He criticizes the government because he loves his country, but he does not think that the Sinhalese people are better than the Tamil people or that the Buddhists there are better than the Christians in the world. He is lucky. He can go anywhere and feel at home among fellow human beings.' And then, with a grin of irony he added, 'In fact, at this time he can go anywhere in the world except his own country.' He was referring to the time when I was impelled by government threats to flee with my family to many years of involuntary self-exile.

There was no doubt about my being lucky. I had extraordinarily civilised parents who had raised us in such a way that we were free from any form of unfair discrimination against other people on grounds of caste, creed, class, colour or language, the common tribal barriers erected against other human beings, although the Buddha, like all great leaders, had taught his followers to respect 'all living things,' not just ourselves and what we found to be 'like' us. My father, the wisest school teacher I ever knew, once advised me not to try to memorise anything at all. He said I should first understand the principles which underlay any problem rather than try to remember and bind myself to mechanical formulae. 'Always go back to first principles and work your way up from there. Then you don't have to remember,' he told me. It has been one of the most valuable guidelines to living I ever learned. In later years, to deal with whatever problem I encountered as a journalist, international civil servant or as a man, I went back to first principles. They were valid, I found, whether one was confronted with the 'problem' of poverty, population growth, epidemics, famine, war and violence as a way of resolving disputes, conflicting ideologies and ethnic or gender differences, whether they arose in Asia, Africa or any other continent.

When my parents were opened in Subud and accepted Pak Subuh as Bapak – though my mother was the same age as Bapak and my father was older than he, I felt that what I learned from the latihan and from Bapak's explanations were a natural deepening and broadening of my parents' guidance. There was no discontinuity whatever and no conflict in values. Indeed, I was as lucky as many of the Subud members I know who had the natural benefit of being raised by considerate parents who had time for them and the natural 'luck' of receiving the Subud contact which Bapak brought to us.

Bapak advised us to realize that one religion was in no way 'better' or 'higher' than any other. 'Only earlier or later, not lower or higher,' he said (Usman interpreting). 'A wall to paradise may be built with bricks. But one brick is not better than another brick. You place one on top of another but they are all essential and equally important parts of the whole wall.'

These are some of the miraculously simple lessons of the message Bapak brought to us. And now he is no longer with us. What are we left with? How shall we manage to live the rest of our lives without Bapak and how shall the new generation grow without the benefit of his physical presence here on this planet? Those questions were in my mind for 25 years before the event. Bapak himself had advised us to experience 'the inevitable' in our inner feelings before it happened so that we were prepared for it. Bapak's death was one of those inevitabilities – for us in Subud the most traumatic – and I felt we should be courageous enough to think unthinkable thoughts and contemplate their implications.

At my first meetings with members of international Subud committees appointed at world congresses, I suggested that each of us separately and all of us together should confront the possibility of Bapak dying during our term of office so that we would respond to that awesome cosmic circumstance with mature understanding. At the back of our minds was the ironic thought that Bapak would outlive all of us and make nonsense of our preparedness. And when he once indicated that he might live beyond his 100th birthday, this sense of irony seemed apt. But Bapak was never dependent on even his own wishes and predictions. As we saw on so many occasions, he was totally subservient to God's will and would surrender to it at any given moment.

Shortly before the Toronto world congress we learned that Bapak's heart had been playing up again and my wife Lestari and I made a special trip to Indonesia to dissuade him from making the long journey to Canada. When we were ushered into the great living room upstairs at the Big House, we noticed a wheel chair partially hidden behind a sofa. There was a slipper Iying beside it and we gave ourselves a knowing smile. Bapak, who liked to keep his illness from bothering Subud members, had evidently risen from his wheel chair and hurried away to change and prepare himself to receive us.

After a few minutes he walked in unaided, straight and self assured

as he usually was, trying to give us the impression that he was in fine fettle, never felt better. The next few moments were spent in the marvellous minuet of 'When did you arrive?' 'How long are you staying?' 'How is your son?' 'And how is the UN?' and so on.

And then I spoke our piece. I said we had heard about Bapak's illness and had come to suggest that he should not undertake the journey to Toronto until he was well again. Bapak looked at me as though I was being a bit dotty and said, 'But members will be disappointed if Bapak does not attend.' I replied that we had no intention of holding a congress without Bapak and that though I had canvassed only a few brothers and sisters I was certain that the entire brotherhood would not wish to risk Bapak's health for a congress. We could put it off or move it to Jakarta or somewhere near for Bapak's convenience.

Bapak became quiet for a minute or two and said, very gravely (Sharif Horthy interpreting), 'Bapak thanks Almighty God that people who have received the latihan are able to feel in this way. But, because in these matters Bapak does only what God wishes, Bapak will go to Toronto. If anything should happen, even if it is Bapak's death, it will be not because of Bapak's wish but because of God's will. Bapak learns how you both love Bapak and is grateful for your concern. But please arrange for Bapak's journey to the congress.'

As a part of my 'preparation' for the eventuality of Bapak's death, I studied the history of what had taken place in other parts of the world when the great messengers had died. Lessons from the past were clear: soon after the obsequies were over there was a temptation for some of the followers to regard the absence of their guide or teacher as a power vacuum which, as does Nature, they abhorred and felt had to be filled. In each case they had not respected the truth constantly enunciated by their teacher that the Power was God's alone and that no human being should try to usurp it. But some people were crass enough to make the attempt, either by making a play for power directly for themselves or indirectly by 'promoting' someone – such as a member of the family of the beloved teacher – as the true inheritor of the messenger's mantle. This, of course, led inevitably to the schisms, theological conflicts and wars for power over the faithful.

Would the same history repeat itself in Subud after Bapak? Whenever I asked myself this question, I was reassured by an inner

nudge which offered promise that since the Subud contact could be transmitted from person to person, the latihan would be constantly renewed and experienced afresh by succeeding generations so that the brotherhood and sisterhood of people who practised it would not allow it to crystallise into a hierarchical bureaucracy which deadens inner growth through power games, regulations, 'systems' and new forms of priestcraft. Bapak, I realized, saw the possibility of even Subud being subject to these pathological pressures despite the evergreen impulse of the latihan and, long before his death, he made very clear public statements that there could be no successor to Bapak – that the latihan for which he was a channel was the only and true successor.

Despite all my preparation for Bapak's passing, news of his death opened a void in front of me. I felt no sense of calamity for the future of Subud but the sense of personal loss was profound. I became intensely conscious of how my life and that of my family had been changed from the time I had stood before him in that small bare room in the west wing of John Bennett's house in Coombe Springs, how Bapak had saved me from certain assassination for my political writings, how kind he had been to Lestari when she needed to be directly in his care at Cilandak for three years, how he had carried my son Imran, then three, out of his bedroom that the little boy had infiltrated with childish insouciance at siesta time and how Bapak had handed him over to me saying, without a trace of annoyance that his rest had been disturbed, 'Your son is more clever than you. He knows where the good things are!'

I wept quietly in the aeroplane as I travelled through Turkey, Switzerland, Britain and back to New York, mourning for myself. As I met Subud members here and there, I saw that they too felt this personal sense of loss. But, as an older member, I was immensely heartened by the natural grace with which they seemed to have accepted the inevitable and adjusted to it. It was as though children who had held on to their father's hand, tottering along the path, found themselves suddenly free from dependency and were now walking on their own, more confidently because they now had, perforce, to be self-reliant.

But we should not be so naive as to imagine that everything will be nice and tidy in the brotherhood of Subud. There will be some among us for whom Bapak's absence may seem as an opportunity to indulge in some power-tripping. There will be those among us

who want to control other people's lives, using Bapak's guidance not as the gentle touch it was but as sharp goads to prod us in the direction they want other people to go. Some of us will take the trees for the wood and others the wood for the trees. But, as long as most of us remember that the organisation is for the latihan and not the other way round, no permanent damage will be done and Subud will go on in this world for 10,000 years as Bapak hoped. I pray that the inner feelings in us will prevail over the emotions of the *nafsu* because Subud, as Bapak once said, is our last chance.

During his lifetime Bapak guided us in our fumbling efforts to produce the living institutional framework for existing and growing as a community spread around the world, albeit very thinly. His advice about the functions of helpers and committees and their relationships with each other as well as with the members in general is to be found stated over and over again in his recorded talks. In that too we have been lucky. Unlike former epochs when the guidance given to communities of the spirit were carried from memory by word of mouth or scratched on bits of leather or on papyrus or on hard stone a long while after the event, we have had recourse to technology which records immediately and replicates the message almost infinitely. We were not very diligent about that at the start of Bapak's mission and a great deal of precious words went unrecorded, so that once again we have to rely on the retentive capacity of the memory cells of those who happened to hear him. I have often pleaded with his interpreters and those who attended on him closely to keep journals of the days in the life of Bapak. But for one reason or another that did not materialise.

Never mind. Let us be thankful for the treasures we have in the archives rather than regret what we may have missed. I, for one, intend to spend a considerable part of whatever time is left to me in helping to preserve, protect and propagate Bapak's word as the living relic of Muhammad Subuh, the most extraordinary ordinary man of our time.