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1

WARNING LIGHT

WHEN I WAS six years old, my mother took me to the dentist to have a tooth extracted ‘by gas’, as it was called in those dreary, post war days, and it was a truly terrifying experience. I’d heard all about gas – it powered our stove, smelt awful and was used in wars to kill people – and we still had scary, wartime gas masks in the cupboard under the stairs (even one large enough to take a whole baby).

Rigid with fear, I was handed over to a white-coated nurse, who ushered me into the surgery, sat me in a huge, black chair and anaesthetised me as brusquely and efficiently as an executioner. I can still recall the rubbery smell of the mask pressed over my face and almost hear the hiss of gas.

I lost consciousness in seconds and seemed to awake in a cathedral-sized, warmly illuminated, spherical space. Pluto, the Disney cartoon dog, ambled into view in glorious technicolour. I felt elated, chuckling in glee. Then Mickey Mouse swooped down onto Pluto’s back, which began to break with a sickening sequence of cracks – no doubt, the noise of my tooth being pulled.

‘We’ll operate on this other tooth now,’ I heard the dentist say as I resurfaced. I began to struggle and scream... And then the

mask was over my face again and everything went black.

This incident left me with a phobia of losing consciousness. It didn't bother me until I was in bed at night. Just as I was slipping into sleep, I would jerk awake, panicking and gasping for breath. It took me over ten years to finally self-cure (thanks mainly to teenage indolence).

One night, while struggling to keep awake in my North London attic bedroom, the voice in my head coldly announced that when I died, my body and my brain would stop working. I would cease to exist and would no longer experience anything. Not even blackness. Just nothing.

The stark horror of this thought made me burst into tears and I called out for my mother. When she came to my bedside I knew instinctively that such things couldn't be discussed with her – death and illness were taboo topics in our house; subjects so heavily laden with fear and superstition that their very mention would bring them calling at the front door. So I just told her there was a mouse under my bed (a common occurrence in old London houses) and it frightened me.

She told me not to be so silly, that it was only a little mouse, and to go to sleep. I was eight years old and this was my first intimation of mortality, my first existential experience. I had discovered the immutable truth that one day, without fail, 'I' would cease to exist.

On reflection, I realise now that I had either failed to create a 'death-coping strategy', or the strategy I had created had failed.

As far as I remember, I must've forgotten the experience the

next day and it didn't happen again until I was about 23. This time these same thoughts caused me to experience a full-scale nervous breakdown, the little mouse under my bed turning into a large, ravenous rat.*

I was born in wartime Shoreditch, close to London's River Thames. My birthplace is well within the sound of Bow Bells, which makes me a 'furrabred' Cockney, something I'm rather proud of.

My parents were ordinary, working class people. My father was a labourer, then a milkman and finally a postman for the rest of his working life; my mother a factory girl turned housewife and full-time Mum. They were 'good enough' parents, doing their best despite being poor. My brother and I were adequately clothed and fed, our birthdays remembered, Christmasses celebrated, train rides to the seaside and bus trips into the country made (we could never afford a family holiday away and my Dad never owned a car in his whole life). This degree of material and familial security was the only way my parents knew of demonstrating their love, of showing how much they cared, and I am deeply grateful for it now.

According to my mother, over the first few weeks of my life I

* There are two types of death-coping strategies, created around the age of three – one either decides one is 'special', and that death will not happen, or one adopts the concept of an 'ultimate saviour'; this latter is more widespread in societies that have 'a socially acceptable immortality myth' (Yalom: *Existential Psychotherapy*) – religion in other words. (We'll come back to this in later chapters.)

lost half my birthweight because she wasn't able to breastfeed me properly and I nearly died. She was only 19, my father was hospitalised and, although the Blitz was over, London was still being bombed regularly – right up to 1944 when 'Buzzbombs' and V2 rockets began to fall from the sky, attempting to kill, maim, demoralise and bring us all to our knees.

But I clung onto life and survived, growing up to be a frail, dreamy, bookish kid with little or no sporting aptitude. I easily passed the eleven plus examination aged ten, and won a scholarship to Dame Owen's School in the heart of London. But, as we were now living in Upper Holloway, my father deemed I was too weedy for daily travel into the City, so I was sent to a nearby Catholic grammar school perched alongside North London's Archway. The strictly Catholic St. Aloysius College only gave me a place because my cousin was already at the school. His father (one of my Dad's brothers) had converted when he married an Irish Catholic. I spent a relatively happy year there, doing well academically, until my mother, father, younger brother and I moved to a new development estate in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire.

There began six miserable years at the local grammar school. The staff seemed to have a grudge against 'London Overspill' as we were called. They made it pretty clear that we 'slum dwellers' weren't welcome, thereby tacitly giving carte blanche to the school bullies (which included some of the staff). The injustices, the unfair punishments meted out and the blatant snobbery made me deeply resentful (and very understanding of how it

must feel to be discriminated against because of the colour of your skin or your religious persuasion).

The way the town was built, divided neatly down the middle by the railway, with a West Side for 'executives' and an East Side for 'artisans' and factories, meant we literally lived on the wrong side of the tracks. We were actually taught in geography lessons that the town was built this way so that the prevailing South West winds would blow the factory effluvia away from the town (but, of course, over the workers' estates to the North East). Sir Ebenezer Howard got a knighthood for that bit of enlightened social architecture.

Twice a day I had to cycle past the local secondary modern school. Wearing my stripy grammar school blazer and National Health glasses, I stood out like a cat in a dog pound and made an attractive target for physical and verbal abuse.

'Grammar school snob!' they shouted, hurling stones and chasing after me or attempting to knock me off my bike.

'Working class oik,' they called me when I arrived at school. I began to think I wasn't acceptable to anyone.

Strangely, these experiences turned me into a 'good fighter'. Many a bullying tough staggered back nursing a bloody nose, staring in amazement at the skinny, bespectacled kid that had inflicted this upon them (my Uncle Alfie had been an Army light-weight boxing champion and had indulged me with many tricks of the trade, the most memorable being, 'Aim for six inches behind the nose.'). However, by the time I got to eighteen, this skill had abandoned me, as I found out while squaring up to

someone whose body had muscled out more than mine ever would. I didn't even see the punch coming. I've never been in a fist fight since.

At some point around my thirteenth birthday I mentally abandoned ship and went into a decline academically. No one noticed – there was a marked lack of pastoral care in the school. So I merely drifted and none of the staff bothered me much – except for the physical education teacher. He was always on my case. I think he thought that, because I couldn't run as fast or as long as the others, I must be doing it on purpose; so he devised some fearful punishments with me specifically in mind. The worst was having to run through a tunnel of my 'classmates' leaning one hand against a wall while they whacked me with a plim-soll held in the other. Ironically, none of them were the same (social) class as me and neither were any of them my mates. This punishment, called 'running the gauntlet', was for the last one dressed – at first, me – but all he succeeded in achieving was to make me devilish cunning. I soon learned to hide the underpants of someone already in the showers as I crawled in last from a cross-country run...

He really caught me out one day, though. I had managed to wangle a sick-note from my mother in order to get out of doing games. I handed it to the PE teacher in the changing rooms. He read it to himself and then said, 'Listen to this everybody.' After reading out the preamble, he went on with lascivious emphasis, '... so could you please excuse him from games as he is a little queer.' The whole of the second year was in that room, falling

about with homophobic laughter. It took me the rest of the school year to live it down in those non-PC days.

This man was instrumental in getting my brother kicked out of the school and I was on his hit list, too, and I never worked out why. Maybe we reminded him of something from his past that he would rather forget.*

The school rewarded athletic prowess and lauded academic achievement (in that order) and considered art and creativity (for which, it turned out, I had a gift) about as useful to school society and the world in general as being able to tie one's shoelaces with one hand. Very clever, Bolt, but so what? Thus, I became an indolent and devious pupil, expending more energy on avoiding school work and being the mischievous 'joker' than I would have used had I just knuckled down and worked. The fact that the school was co-educational meant there were girls to impress, too; I couldn't do this through sport, instead adopting the pseudo-persona of a James Dean-style 'Rebel Without a Cause'. This act, played out by a skinny, bespectacled, spotty youth, must've appeared bizarre in the extreme.

I eventually walked out of school, in protest and out of boredom, aged seventeen, two weeks into the upper sixth form, and proceeded to do various jobs, such as working for the local newspaper and minding machines in local factories. One day, while weeding a rose bed for the District Council at 7.30am, it

* Ironically, some forty years later, my mother sent me a cutting from her local rag. This man was then in prison having been 'outed' as a serial, male-child sexual abuser throughout his teaching career. I thank the Lord now that I was not to his taste.

occurred to me, out of the blue, that I could very well end up doing this for the rest of my life.

Through my girlfriend's father, who was a school governor, I managed to get an unqualified teaching post at a nearby secondary school. Thanks to the art teacher there, who convinced me I had a talent that was worth developing, I began studying art at night school, until starting a Foundation Course, aged twenty-one, at St. Albans College of Art.

Walking into the college building on that first day felt like a homecoming. I loved the cultural kudos of being at art school and the sense of freedom being a student gave me after four years of mundane employment. I revelled in the work, both practical and theoretical, as well as the intellectual interaction with fellow students and our lecturers. This Foundation Year was exceptionally well run, and I shall never forget the trips to the Reading Room at the British Museum where we students were allowed to actually handle and study drawings by the greats. I remember holding in my hands such sublime things as a silver point drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, through to a shopping list written by Reynolds, the latter making me realise people from the past were just like us – a revelation in those hungry-for- knowledge days!

I also enjoyed the friends I made and felt, because of a newfound talent for organising dances and entertainments, I was valued and popular. I played drums in a rock band, had a regular girlfriend with an in-depth, very satisfying sexual relationship together, went to lots of parties and got drunk often. The lifestyle fitted me like a wetsuit and, in common with the Charles Ryder

character in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, I too felt I was 'drowning in honey'.

After successfully completing the Foundation Year at St. Albans, I won a place on a degree course at Maidstone College of Art and moved to the Medway town in 1964.

There, after a year or so, I discovered psychedelic drugs, as did many of my contemporaries. It all started as a bit of fun, a new experience. Then we began to use them as a way of opening up our imaginations, of making our creative powers keener. Like the French poet Rimbaud (one of our heroes) we felt 'a complete derangement of the senses' was the best way of tapping into the very source of creativity – that richly rewarding nether world of ideas, dreams, fantasies, visions and genius as we perceived it.

It didn't quite work out like that, however. In a very short space of time I went from being a happy-go-lucky student, interested only in my burgeoning craft and having a good time (booze, babes and bands) to becoming deeply introspective, totally paranoid and very, very fearful again of death and my inevitable annihilation.

This time it started while I was doing nightwork in an ice cream warehouse during the college vacation. Our job was to stock the vans ready for their next day deliveries. I was, by this time, smoking a great deal of marijuana and taking LSD, both of which were freely available in London and the Home Counties. We'd start work at midnight and, if the orders were light because the weather was cool, we'd be finished by three or four in the morning and could go home to sleep. I was usually up around

eight, so I guess I was unwittingly suffering from sleep deprivation and the effects of the mind expanding drugs (as they were euphemistically called), when I awoke one morning feeling very strange and dissociated.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I had a premonition of death.

That particular morning, I was going with a friend to Hatfield Courthouse (he was facing some kind of motoring offence charge). I remember waking up, sitting on the edge of the sofa I had been sleeping on and the voice in my head said, 'The court building will collapse on you.' Then an image from the film *Samson and Delilah*, which I had seen as a child, of a man being crushed between two pillar stones after Samson had pulled down the temple loaded into my mind. This again triggered the chain of thoughts about being dead, about being annihilated, that there'd never be anything, anywhere, ever again.

This time I couldn't stop thinking about it. The thoughts were grinding through my head like streams of cars on a rush-hour motorway. Terror kicked in hard as my adrenaline glands pumped non-stop doses of gut-wrenching chemical into my bloodstream, making me feel fearful and shaky all the time. If you've ever had a sudden shock, or a wave of fear pass through you, you'll know what I mean – except the feeling lasted all day and every day, making sleep impossible. The adrenaline flooded my system, appearing to feed my thinking mind, which, in turn, locked on to its chosen subject, scrolled through a chain of thoughts and snapped back to its nihilistic conclusion, triggering another gush, over and over again. It was impossible to stand

outside of this loop and the resultant terror. I simply *became* it and could sense nothing but fear. To make matters worse, I had absolutely no idea of what was happening to me.

I remember days when the world appeared drained of colour, as though watching a black and white film – but a film with no meaning. And it was this sense of meaninglessness that overwhelmed me. I would walk out of my house and stand rigid, uncomprehending, not able to recognise anything. All I could perceive was a cruel, heartless existence of interacting ‘stuff’ with no meaning or purpose; things weren’t even things any more, just ‘there’ – cold, compassionless, hideous; there was no God, no creator, I told myself. Just this hideous accident of ‘isness’.

Later, I read of a similar occurrence in Sartre’s *Nausea*, in which he writes of experiencing what he calls ‘the very paste of things...’

“the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder – naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness...”

After some weeks of this mental and physical suffering, I crawled (so it seemed) to my local GP, who immediately diagnosed Anxiety Depression.

‘Classic case!’ I remember him saying delightedly. ‘Slim, dark and artistic,’ and he prescribed a drug called Serenid.

It worked in that it masked the symptoms and stopped the flood of adrenaline, but left me feeling one-dimensional – flat, grey and lifeless. It was as if a loud-knocking, rough-running

engine had been switched off and the problem considered fixed.

A month later, I could no longer tolerate this state of being, either (it seemed even more dire), and made a symbolic act of throwing the bottle of Serenid into the River Medway, which runs through Maidstone, where I was back living with my first wife and our child after the summer vacation. (My wife and I had married at college ‘because we had to’ – a sixties’ euphemism for conceiving out of wedlock – and we were not happy together.) Looking back, I now wonder if the sense of both college and my marriage coming to an end had, in tandem with drug use, had psychologically shaken again my inadequate death-coping strategy. Basically, I see now, I was on overload and my system just couldn’t take any more.

Prior to the onslaught of depression, though, I had worked extremely hard and obtained a first class honours degree in Graphic Design and soon after, a coveted position in a top West End design studio. A job in London, in design, had been my dream before I started on psychedelics and had my breakdown. Now it seemed a pointless irritant.

While begrudgingly commuting daily to London, solely to support my family, I began a programme of haphazard and eclectic reading, looking for understanding and some answers – unwittingly become a seeker. I began to explore Rajah and Hatha yoga, while devouring books on philosophy, Zen and mysticism, comprehending little of what I was reading, but driven by a feeling that the answer to life, the universe and everything was therein, but just outside of my grasp. If only I could stop thinking, I

thought, I'd be able to uncover my 'true self', 'merge with the godhead' (a concept I had bought into of there being some form of 'higher power' inherent in my deep self – or so I hoped) and thus find inner peace.

I was not alone in my search. The contemporary *Zeitgeist* was centred around a belief in the essentiality of finding one's true nature, and that the only way to achieve this was to join the nebulous 'revolution' and cast aside our cultural brainwashing. Thus 'turn off your mind, relax and float downstream' and 'tune in, turn on, drop out'* – became our mantras. This ersatz, but quite accurate in many ways, philosophy decreed that the twentieth century obsession with 'profit before everything' had dulled our sense of who we were. By throwing off the yoke of materialism and its henchmen – science and technology – we would discover that we were Hobbit-like creatures, born to live in harmony with the land and the universal power of nature that had created us. We were, in essence, a race of 'lotus eaters'.

This piecemeal, but, at the time, deliciously anti-establishment

* A sound bite created by Dr. Timothy Leary, who explained in his 1983 autobiography *Flashbacks*: 'Turn on meant go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. Tune in meant interact harmoniously with the world around you – externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. Drop out suggested an elective, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. Drop Out meant self-reliance, a discovery of one's singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change. Unhappily my explanations of this sequence of personal development were often misinterpreted to mean "Get stoned and abandon all constructive activity."'

belief system owed much to the misconstruing of writers as varied as Walt Whitman, D.H. Lawrence, Karl Marx and Nietzsche, to name but a few. This hippy-trippy philosophy is still extant today, having mutated into multifarious New Age sub-cultures. Perhaps it also sowed the seeds for the more pertinent Green and Anti-globalisation movements. Our mistake back in the sixties, however, was to intellectually throw the baby out with the bath water. I certainly have no desire now to go back to the Middle Ages, forgoing the positive, life enhancing aspects of science and technology.

They were heady days, though. Psychedelic drugs were considered to be ambrosia – the food of the Gods. Woodstock and the Summer of Love were about to happen; the Beatles had just released *Sergeant Pepper*; Dr. Timothy Leary and *Oz* were required reading, Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd required listening. ‘Flower Power’ and ‘Peace’ were the buzz words. There was a palpable sense of togetherness, of being part of something happening on a global scale. It is undeniable now that the youth revolution in the United States actually helped turn the tide of public opinion against, and was instrumental in ending, the war in Vietnam. Historically, it’s interesting to remember that, during this war, one of the most powerful weapons in the Viet Cong’s armoury was hallucinogenic drugs which, covertly distributed, helped undermine American troops’ *esprit de corps* and, therefore, their willingness to kill or be killed while waging a war in a foreign land for a political cause they no longer believed in, or even understood.

Meanwhile, I continued to take LSD and to smoke hashish

regularly and my 'trips', as they were called, became more and more 'spiritual' in content, but I could make no sense of them at the time. They were often quite terrifying to me, and my 'come downs' – the drug culture equivalent to an alcohol hangover – were increasingly depressive.

One early LSD-induced experience I'll never forget began very quickly after swallowing my tab of LSD. I was suddenly in a place which, it was made clear to me, I should not be in, my presence causing outcry amongst its inhabitants. A senior being was called for, who manifested as a three-dimensional pyramid, reminiscent of a metronome. This being was in an extremely agitated state and officiously reaffirmed that I shouldn't be there and ordered that I was to be escorted back to my own realm forthwith. As we flew back to the earth, my angelic escort showed me 'all the evils of the world'. I can still inwardly experience the memory of soaring over a giant compost heap as I homed in on my body. And then I came to.

My co-trippers were so relieved that I had regained consciousness. I had apparently been lying on the floor with my eyes rolled into my head, comatose, oblivious to the world. They had thought I was going to die on them. I had completely ruined their trip and had 'brought them down' – an unforgivable act in drug circles.

Another experience indelibly pencilled on my mind began as I entered an unbelievably pure, infinite and blissful white space that was, I intuited, the source of all being, all knowledge. As my consciousness 'merged' with it, I became one with a knowingness

and understood ‘everything is all right for ever and ever’ and that there was nothing to fear – even death. I was fully aware that being integrated into this ‘knowing’ was not the same as ‘knowing’ in the normal, cerebral sense; more that being integrated into ‘the knowing’ simply meant there were no more questions, that there was only one answer, and this was it – eternal pure being and contentment. But, as later events were to show me, this experience was merely as a film show and when over, the drug ‘spent’, I was just as immersed in my worldly troubles and just as terrified and confused as before.

Things were getting out of hand. I was becoming more and more introverted and wrapped up in myself and my fears. Friends found me hard to tolerate – I was no fun anymore. All I could talk about was my obsession with death and the *pot pourri* of Eastern esotericism I had absorbed through my unstructured and eclectic reading.

It was around this time that my marriage broke up. I’ve never discussed what happened with my ex-wife. I assume she couldn’t take any more of the abstracted, drug-taking, self-wrapped depressive that I had become and that my ‘dis-ease’ scared her, so she emotionally escaped with one of our friends. I don’t blame her. I’d have probably done the same. In those days, neither of us really believed in our marriage vows – ‘In sickness and in health, for better or for worse...’ But, we’ve each been wed to our current spouses for over thirty years now, so I guess we’ve both come to terms with the concept.

I finally left my design job in London (no doubt just before I

was fired) and found myself unable and unwilling to work – and consequently unemployable. Looking back I realise now that I had reached the lowest point in my life – the nadir. And I was so wretched, so *miserable*.

By this time – early 1968 – scoring drugs, as we urbanely called it, was the only thing I could do successfully. ‘To score’ meant that not only were you the man (or woman) of the moment, but that you had gone one up in the game of trying to beat the repressive society and outwit its ‘fascist’ police – and got away with it. It was highly illegal to be in possession, and offenders who were caught carrying soft or hard drugs were often imprisoned. So, with twenty pounds of a friend’s money in my pocket (I was always broke, always hustling to get money for hallucinogens), I had nervously journeyed up to London from Maidstone, where I was still living, to see an old college friend who I knew had good connections in the drug world...

I need to make it clear at this point that, although I was immersed in the drug sub-culture, I was not a hard line drug user – I never graduated onto drugs such as heroin. I was far too timid to do that. These so-called ‘hard drugs’ are highly addictive barbiturates and opiates and I was trying to go in the opposite direction, to ‘awaken’ myself. (I did dabble in amphetamines, but the depressive after-effects of these stimulants were too awful to bear, even for me, as their usage left me with an enormous emotional overdraft.) Neither was I a recreational user, just taking drugs for the pleasure of it and a good night out. For me, taking hallucinogenic drugs was a serious, studious business. They were

the only medium I knew that could transport me from a mode of being that I felt was one dimensional, earth bound and ‘brain locked’, to an alternative that, despite the inherent terrors and mostly nightmarish experiences, seemed ‘other-worldly’, and at least held a faint promise of salvation from annihilation.

I also need to balance the picture. At the beginning it was a lot of fun. I still chuckle over one incident. We had taken the day off and Steve, the singer in our band, and I were very much under the influence of ‘pot’. It was a hot summer’s day and we were sitting in the window of our fourth floor flat in an old Victorian house. The wide sill was lead-dressed and extremely hot to the touch.

‘I bet you could fry an egg on that,’ Steve said.

‘Oh, man, yes! Let’s give it a try,’ I replied (an obsession with mundane minutiae, which then take on the power of epiphany is a well-documented drug-use phenomenon). We went and got an egg, some butter and a spatula, melted the butter on the sill and cracked the egg with great anticipation. In slow motion the egg slid down the sill (we hadn’t noticed it sloped) and disappeared from view. We tentatively peered out of the window. The egg had bounced off the bay window below and sloped and splattered onto the pavement three storeys down. An elderly lady was standing staring at it in total bemusement. We were convulsed with laughter. We couldn’t stop and laughed and laughed until it literally hurt.

And I also had some beautiful experiences. I saw nature in a way that affects me still. I remember one day sitting ‘listening’ to a meadow of multi-coloured flowers singing, my auditory and

visual centres merging as one (Synesthesia, I now know it's called). I think my highly attuned sense of colour harmony stems from this period as well. Then one evening, as the sun went down, I became aware of the trees around me beginning their inward breath after breathing out all day, and I realised how subjective time is, depending on a being's size and bio-rhythms. And I'd spend hours on my back looking at cloud formations or the night sky with a genuine sense of awe and wonder. How sad to rarely make the space to actually do that now, although if I do, the feelings of awe and wonder can still return.

What I didn't recognise at the time, though, was how much damage drugs were doing to my inner nature and my frail connection to it. Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) was the drug of choice, simply called 'acid' by its users. What an apt name. Acid was eating into my sanity and had completely corroded away my motivation to operate in the world. But that tenuous connection with other possible dimensions was always there. I really believed psychedelics were 'manna' and that I was on a 'way'. In reality, I was floundering in limbo land. Most eastern spiritual practices require a lot of self-discipline and self-sacrifice. Thanks to the effects of drugs, I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. Most of the time I didn't even want to.

So, why didn't I turn to my religion, or to psychotherapy for help? Regarding religion, my guess is that such a bad job had been done on me at school that there could be no synaptic link whatsoever in my brain between what I was looking for and what school religion had attempted to teach me. It's clear to me now

that the concept of the Holy Spirit (also known as the Tao, enlightenment, unity with the Godhead etc.) was what I sought (although I still need to write ‘possibly’) – it’s just a question of semantics obfuscated by layers of cultural distortion. As for psychotherapy, I suppose I just simply never made the connection at the time. Shrinks were for mad people, I thought. And it didn’t even occur to me that I might be crazy-sick, too. Looking back, I can see that the depression was a flashing warning light indicating a deep inner malaise. This warning system is, I’m convinced, an inherent grace we all have within. The turmoil I was experiencing was the beginning of a healing process, the psychedelics, having done their ‘kick-start’ job, then getting in the way...

Meanwhile, back in London, waiting for the dealer to arrive, I was browsing through my friend’s bookshelves when I came across a book entitled *Gurdjieff*. I recognised the name as I had just finished reading Colin Wilson’s revised version of *The Outsider*, the book which earned him the sobriquet ‘angry young man’ and hurled him into celebrity.

Wilson had written, in a new postscript to the second edition, that taking psychedelic drugs was like driving down a country lane at night and switching off the headlights. One could see for miles around, he wrote, but had to crawl along at walking pace. What was required, he continued, was a way in which one could drive at speed with headlights on, analogous to living a normal life, yet have a spotlight on the roof in order to see all around – or into the mysteries of existence and oneself – at the same time. He thought he had found a way to achieve this through

Gurdjieff's system of Self Study. To this day I still find in Wilson's analogy an excellent summation of man's oldest essence versus existence question: how to live fully in this world without losing touch with the so-called 'spiritual' and vice versa? Kierkegaard would've enjoyed the analogy, too (but would've opted for the 'walking pace' of the religious life, no doubt).

So, I borrowed the book, collected the drugs and made my way home. On the train I dipped into the preface. There was a story about two seekers who had become totally confused and almost psychotic through blindly following esoteric Eastern methods, but had found peace through something called 'Subud'; apparently something that Gurdjieff had prophesied would 'come from the East' after his death.

Eh? I didn't understand a word, but strongly identified with their situation and what I was reading. 'Interesting stuff,' I thought, 'must look into that sometime.'

I had been home a couple of hours when a friend (also called Wilson*), who lived in the same house, called round to see me. He was very excited and said he thought I'd be very interested in what he had to tell me. It turned out that his girlfriend's parents had recently joined a movement led, according to him, by a man from the Far East, who'd had 'a ball of white light come down into his head', which had 'transformed him', and he was coming to London to 'share this with anyone who wanted it.'

* Don't want to read too much into these coincidences, but not only was there this 'Wilson' connect, but also the person who'd invited the 'man from the Far East' to London was the famous J.G. Bennett, and the twenty pounds for drugs had been given to me by a friend, also called Bennett.

My ears pricked up. White light? This could only mean one thing – Nirvana – that ethereal panacea that would make everything all right for ever and ever, amen. I didn't give a thought to how any of this could possibly work in practice at the time.

My friend then mentioned the word 'Subud', and I remember being startled. 'That's very weird,' I exclaimed, 'I've just been reading about that!'

On reflection, these synchronistic events make me feel that even then I was being guided by an agency beyond my understanding – something I still believe is possible today (maybe).

Some four weeks later, about a dozen of us, friends and acquaintances, gathered at a house in Tunbridge Wells, where we were treated to a candlelit supper in the garden. The conversation meandered from topic to topic as the wine flowed, until my impatience got the better of me.

'What's all this about Subud, then?' I asked.

As Léonard, our host, began to explain, a feeling of peace spread over me, contrasting with the angst that I had habitually felt for over a year. I had never experienced anything like this before, and I remember thinking that this was great wine he was serving. But within ten minutes I knew, not only with my mind, but deep within my feelings, too, that this 'Subud', as the association is called, was exactly what I had been searching for.

'There is,' I was told, 'a three month waiting period for applicants before they can join. This will give you time to ask questions and to make absolutely sure this lifetime commitment is for you.' I was disappointed, wanting it there and then. But I filled in the

application form and impatiently waited out the three months.

Being officially separated from my first wife by this time, I moved back to my parents' council house and got a job as a part-time postman. My nearest Subud group was in Stevenage. In those days the small group met in a rented, newish Quaker Hall in the centre of town and, for a couple of months, I travelled over by bus once a week to ask my questions (strangely, I didn't have that many) and to meet the other members. Under normal circumstances, they would have seemed so odd to me. Not one 'hip' person among them. They were all in business or teaching, mostly older than me, and definitely 'Norman Normals' – the most disparaging epithet for the un-hip that sixties youth could devise. And yet they had arrived where I wanted to be. This knowledge was enough to override the prejudices that had grown over the years of subversive reading and hallucinogenic drug taking. So I gave them the benefit of the doubt.

The date for my 'opening', the Subud word for joining, was duly set as the ninth of October 1968. The funny thing is, on the eighth of October I smoked my last 'joint' and, apart from a slip up in Morocco with a 'hash cookie' a few months later, never touched drugs again.

On the evening of the ninth, I was ushered into the rented and dimly lit, octagonal Quaker hall. There were four men present. I was asked to remove my shoes and glasses, to close my eyes and to ignore whatever anyone was doing. I can't remember whether the current Subud 'Opening Statement' was read to me or not. It asks the person being opened to affirm that their wish to join

is sincere, freely willed and based on a desire to ‘worship Almighty God’. I think if I’d heard the words ‘worship’ and ‘God’, I would have walked away, the churchy connotations would have been too strong for me (and still are today – but more of that later).

It went very quiet in the hall. With a palpable rush of air, the four men simultaneously let out loud moans as though being overwhelmed with grief or pain. I heard a couple of them fall heavily to the floor. I was also aware of a vast, empty blackness inside myself.

The moaning continued, rising and falling in intensity. I became conscious of a force at the back of my knees, like someone gently kicking me. I opened my eyes and took a sneaky look over my shoulder; there was nobody there. This didn’t surprise me, I had read about ‘Subud experiences’ and fully expected (and hoped) that something out of the ordinary would happen. So, I shut my eyes again and the ‘kicking’ recommenced, becoming more forceful, until I was eventually made to fall on to my knees as though in supplication. Then I began to experience a heavy feeling of remorse. I felt so *sorry*, but had no idea for what at the time, but it was very deep and real and as undeniable, and as painful, as a headache. I can’t remember anything else about the experience except that the background moaning changed into pleasant, harmonious singing after a while as I just knelt there, thoughtless, somehow suspended in time and space...

In what felt like five minutes, the half hour was over. I knew I

hadn't been asleep, yet I was being slowly brought back to my normal state of consciousness by one of the men gently shaking my shoulder. I stood up, completely dazed, as though I had been sleep-walking and had suddenly woken in a strange place.

We left the hall and, as members were quietly congratulating and welcoming me, I burst into tears. I was so happy somehow knowing Subud was real, not a con, that I had found my answer, that I was somehow 'home'. At the same time I was again filled with remorse and self-reproach. As the tears flowed, I cathartically sobbed away many years' worth of fear and self-torture there and then...

This was my first *latihan* (the Subud name for the exercise) and something had definitely happened, but it took many years to grasp the nature of what it was.

2

DESCRIBING THE COLOUR BLUE

So WHAT IS Subud? This is going to be difficult, not only because Subud is an organisation and a culture, but also because it's an experience. And experiences are fiendishly difficult to describe – try describing the colour blue to someone blind from birth, or explaining sweetness to someone who has never tasted sugar, and you'll understand the nature of the problem.

The difficulty is, words can never actually be what they describe. They can only ever be symbolic representations of the things and experiences we sense. The best we can hope for is that the way we order the agreed representations can at least resonate with the personal experiencing of the reader or listener. But they can never ever be, nor accurately describe, the actual thing or original experience.

And then, if I were to tell you, 'I stuck my finger in the lamp socket and got an electric shock', if you've done it yourself you'll have a memory trace what it's like; if you haven't, you'll still have an inherent understanding through others' tales and the media. And neither do I have to explain lamps, sockets or even electrical energy to you. These things are, more or less, tangible, conforming to quantifiable physical laws and can be perceived with the five senses through the mind.

But if I were to write 'Subud is a direct, one-to-one contact

with the purifying power of God' (for the religious minded), or 'Subud is a way of realeasing your true individuality through the beneficence of the Universe' (for those who are not), I move into different territory. A place where nothing is tangible. Everything is subjective and on a personal conceptual and experiential basis. Even someone who has felt it for themselves has to interpret the experience through their mind, using language symbolically. The experience is then open to misinterpretation and misrepresentation. Even by and to oneself.

You, the reader, will have your own concept of God, even if it's not believing there is one. I can't begin to explain my concept (of a benign, creative force) to myself satisfactorily, let alone to you!

In truth, the only way to find out about Subud is to go and try it for yourself. That's what makes it all so fascinating. But none of this is going to stop me trying to put my own understanding and experiencing into words, just in case something resonates for you.

The second difficulty lies within the semantics of the Subud world, for Subud is not only a 'spiritual' experience, but also an organisation, a life style and a culture. Subud members themselves rarely bother with these distinctions. When they say, 'I'm going to Subud,' they mean not only are they they are going to *latihan* to work on themselves (or rather 'to be worked on' – see next chapter), but also to perform any functions they may hold within the Subud organisation aswell as socialising with other members.

Maybe I should start with what Subud is not.

It's not a religion, nor is it officially connected to or affiliated with any religious organisation. Members continue to practise their own religion if they wish, or may have none at all. You don't even necessarily have to have a belief in God in order to join (I would be surprised, though, to find a Subud member that didn't have belief in a 'higher power' of some description before or after joining, but there are atheists in Subud, too). On paper, and according to the way the founder set Subud up, it is not a cult, having no leader or leaders. It should have no priesthood, no creed, no doctrine, no belief system and no teaching. Therefore, by definition, there should be no hierarchy, no disciples, no acolytes. However, in later chapters we'll discuss how we, the membership, have tended to 'map' our past experience of religion onto our new – that age-old human desire to formalise and categorise experience – thus giving Subud an outer form that could be perceived from the outside as a 'religious cult'.

Before joining, and after, there are, again on paper, no examinations to pass, no 'levels' to attain, no preparatory or development courses to attend; no initiation rights and no novitiates (but there is a waiting period and a joining ceremony – see later).

In fact, there are virtually no pre-requisites at all for joining Subud. However, the more experienced members that interview an applicant would need to satisfy themselves that the person's wish to join is based on an informed, serious consideration rather than the whim of the moment. This is not just to cut down on the paper work, but more to do with timing and readiness. That's

why there's a three month cooling off, or waiting period (but this can be waived in certain circumstances). They'd also use this time to make sure that there's an understanding of and a willingness to accept the kind of far reaching life changes that joining Subud could possibly bring. It's not always easy going, despite the apparent ease of joining and simplicity of practice.

In its outer sense (worldly/cultural), Subud is merely its membership at any given moment. It doesn't own anything much (a few buildings worldwide) or produce anything in particular. The members do need to organise themselves in the normal way of the world, though, in order to handle finances, communications and so on. That's the only reason there's a corporate organisation. On the surface, this is purely pragmatic. All office holders are Subud members who usually do the job to aid their inner development in some way or another, or simply because they're good at it. Hardly anyone gets paid, so they don't do it for the money, that's for sure. Some may even offer their services (or write books!) as a way of 'spreading Subud in the world', if this ideal has become woven into their personal belief systems.

Although I stated earlier that Subud is not a cult, I have to admit that, because you have an organisation with many people in various stages of process, there are those that make it cultish by their beliefs, attitudes and psychological needs, albeit a different, ever-changing group as the process works us through rigid attitudes over time. Mythology abounds, too, mainly amongst the older members, particularly about Subud's founder, who becomes a projected 'father figure' for those with that need. Like

most groups, Subud members have their own insider language, heavily flavoured with Indonesian – the language of its founder, and Islam – his religion. But none of this is *de riguer*, or relevant to the process – more to do with Subud’s homespun ‘culture’, which you are at liberty to embrace wholeheartedly, dabble in, or completely ignore.

You will even come across dishonest people, selfish people, domineering and power-hungry people and so on, just as you would in the outer organisation of any association. This is all because, quite simply, ‘humans will be humans’, and it’s all down to ‘the stuff’ they bring with them.

Subud as an organisation now exists in 70-plus countries throughout the world and numbers about 10,000 active members, although maybe a million have joined since it started unofficially sometime around 1925, and officially in 1947. But members die. Some do not find what they want and leave. Others get exactly what they want and then leave anyway. So, and this is an odd phenomenon, the membership has remained static around the 10K mark for decades. Most other groups are either on the increase or in decline, but in Subud it’s as though as members die or leave, new ones fill their place.

There is an international body called the World Subud Association (WSA) which determines outer policy, and a kind of secretariat, or executive, called the World Subud Council (WSC), which is mainly responsible for setting up World Congresses every four years at which Subud’s worldly, outer policies are defined, problems aired and budgets set, just like in any

other organisation. The venue moves from country to country, and the officers change at each congress, thus avoiding power bases and a permanent hierarchy – unlike some movements. However, organisational change is slow or non-existent, the founder's 50 year old set up remaining sacrosanct and heavily supported by his daughter, who seems to have taken his place as 'spiritual guide' (more on this later).

National organisations are fairly autonomous, following the legalities in force in each individual country. They usually have a National Committee and a National Office which organises an annual Congress, keeps membership lists, prepares accounts and budgets, looks after property, communications and so on. There are also world Zones and National Regions, but it's all too complicated and boring for me. (One great thing about Subud – you don't have to have anything to do with all this outer bumph unless you want or need to, which decision has no effect on the *latihan* process.)

There are Subud groups in most large towns and they too are autonomous, with a committee organising the group's own premises, finances and meetings. In Britain, where I live, there are 70 groups and about 1,000 active members.

You can find out about Subud on the world wide web, or from books written by members about their experiences, often to be found in public libraries. They're also available from Subud Publications International. You'll find their address at the back of this book.

Subud does not advertise for members nor does it proselytise,

so it can be quite difficult to find out about it. Most new members come in through friends and family, books and now the Internet.

Subud is open to anyone regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, creed and financial or educational status. There is no upper age limit, but you have to be 17 to join.

Experience has shown that it is prudent to treat an applicant with a history of mental illness (particularly if still on medication) as a special case and to monitor progress with care and compassion. There are a lot of powerful forces flying around if you mix psychiatric drugs and Subud, and it can appear as if the person's life has gone even more haywire as the Subud process starts. This is usually more upsetting for families and friends than the person involved, though. The same goes for alcoholics and drug abusers, but they'd definitely have to stop taking their drug of choice if they want to join as these powerful forces can disrupt not only their own process, but sometimes other people's, too.

Subud makes every effort not to be tarred with the same brush as the more notorious, 'one fit philosophy' cults that often leave a trail of lost and deranged (and broke) people in their wake, but... you will inevitably find there are lost, deranged, broke and disaffected members (mostly ex-members) associated with Subud. It's a process essentially 'designed' to winkle out delusion, and there will be casualties, both psychological and financial.

Which reminds me, there is no charge to join Subud and giving money on a regular basis is left up to the individual member.

But, as most group treasurers will tell you, Subud is free, but the hall you practise it in costs a fortune to heat!

I think it's time to bite the bullet and begin to explain the broad, inner (spiritual/mystical/psychological) aspect of Subud. Please understand that this description can only be my personal version. There are as many descriptions and understandings as there are Subud members. I'm reminded of the old Indian tale of the blind men describing an elephant. One feels the trunk and says, 'Aha! An elephant is like a snake!' Another puts his arms around a leg and says, 'No! An elephant is like a tree!' a third, handling the tail, is convinced an elephant is 'like a rope', and so on.

The word Subud is actually an acronym based on three Sanskrit words: *Susila*, which means 'correct living' (I understand this to be in a natural sense as well as its moral, compassionate and humane implications); *Budhi* which means 'the highest potential within mankind' (this I take as referring to that unique, totally individual aspect of ourselves, or 'that little bit of our Creator's creative energy that's in us all', often referred to as the self, the spirit or soul, and as opposed to the everyday self, or ego, with its cultural and self-styled 'hang-ups') and *Dharma* – 'according to the will of God' (or, if you prefer, 'as predetermined by the creative life force, or the ruling power of the Universe). Thus, to me, Subud can be summed up as 'The potential to live harmoniously and creatively in this world as my authentic self through being in touch with 'the Creator' (replace with God or His power, the Creator, the universal spirit, Nature,

evolution or however you see your ‘higher self’).

After 30 years’ membership*, I find that’s still a pretty tall order, but I’m getting there.

Subud first came into the world (in its present, inner form, that is, I’m certain it’s been around a long time) in 1925 when this new manifestation of the Creator’s energy descended as a ball of light which entered a young Indonesian man called Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo while he was out walking, or so the story goes.

This ball of light gives me a problem. This phenomenon was, apparently witnessed by others. Now, on the one hand, there was I writing earlier that this is all, intangible, inner stuff, and yet on the other, here’s a physical event, reminiscent of something out of the Old Testament. Did it happen that way? Is it a symbol, a metaphor? The jury’s still out for me. Such a paranormal event is, apparently, a common form of manifestation in Indonesia, where for centuries the village headman has been expected to receive wisdom and guidance exactly this way (the descending ball of light is called *wahyu* or revelation), so let’s not get too carried away for now.

Anyway, this young man thought he was having a heart attack and went home to bed expecting to die. That night, and for the next thousand days and nights, he was ‘trained’ and ‘purified’ by this mysterious power – I guess ‘unearthing’ his authentic self in the process. The chapters on the Subud *latihan* (the core activity of Subud) and the life of Muhammad Subuh will, I hope, explain

* *Tempus fugit...* it’s now 42 years as I revise the text for this third edition

this more fully.

Subuh (his name has no direct connection with Subud, by the way. Subuh is, in fact, the Indonesian version of the name of the Muslim dawn prayer) was then told, he claims, by an authority far greater than his own, that this ‘purifying contact’ could and should be passed on to whoever asked for it. Thus the Subud concept was born. Why him? I don’t know, but the idea of lightning striking at the highest point might fit if one believed in external manifestations of ‘the spirit’, or perhaps one could use the analogy of only being able to pick up TV signals if you have an ariel and a correctly tuned set, and at that moment, Subuh must have had the right equipment.

In 1947, the Indonesian government insisted that all ‘spiritual groups’ must be registered and it was then that Subud, by now consisting of a few hundred followers around Muhammad Subuh, was named and became an entity.

It wasn’t until 1957, thirty three years later, that Subud began to spread worldwide, when Bapak, as Muhammad Subuh is known to Subud members, was invited to England (Bapak is simply an Indonesian term of respect for an older man meaning ‘Respected Father’. It is sometimes shortened to ‘Pak’ which is more akin to ‘Pa’ or ‘Dad’. Unfortunately, some cult leaders are also called Father or Dad but the Indonesian sense is different, I’m assured, as is Bapak’s position within Subud purported to be.)

After 85 years in the world, the effects of Subud on an individual are still quite unpredictable. From a socio-religious or

moral viewpoint, both the short and mid-term effects would appear to be positive. From a psychological behaviourist's angle they might sometimes appear bizarre in the short term, eliciting a begrudging, 'Well, it doesn't seem to have done them any harm' summation in the mid-term. We'll have to wait for their long term judgement.

Its outer, mainly behavioural, manifestations continue to be as varied and wide ranging as its members. For instance, someone who has always been timid and lacking in courage may become strong and self-confident. A person who tends to be self-centred and domineering may find him or herself feeling empathy and compassion for the first time in their life. Another may find a marriage partner after years of searching. Some may enter Subud with rocky marriages and have them saved. Others' marriages may fall apart as the Subud process winkles out falsehood and pretence. Some marriage partners may even find the inner resolve to work on their marriage together in order to save it. Some members have discovered their real work in this life as latent talents emerge. Some have been cured of sickness. Some have had to face ill-health as pent-up frustrations or long-nurtured resentments are released. A few have become rich, others have lost tainted, inherited wealth and so on, and so on.

At all times, though, the strength to face tribulation seems to come as part of the package and no member ever seems to have had to endure more change than they could handle. I believe this is similar to what is loosely termed 'God's mercy' or 'grace' in religion. And because there is a similarity to many religious

sto'ries of epiphany, particularly Saul's Road to Damascus' experience, it's easy to see why some people naturally tend to map their past religious experiencing over their new and see Subud as a solely religious experience. I, on the other hand, do exactly the same and see it from a solely psychological perspective. But the reality is, in following the Subd process, something changes in the self, for the better, no matter how it is classified, be that religious epiphany or psychological transformation.

Very often, with this process of change, comes understanding. Things that you may have nurtured as positive attributes, such as psychic powers or a perfectionist streak, for example, may turn out to be burdens. Things that you thought you were not capable of become possibilities, such as starting a business, taking up a long desired career or healing long-standing family feuds. The process is summed up neatly for me by the well-known aphorism used by Alcoholics Anonymous that goes: 'Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.' Subud seems to be the answer to that prayer, supplying, in the main, and over many years, the missing serenity, acceptance and courage as well as the wisdom to know what is 'real' and what is 'delusion'.

Subud is, in modern jargon, the most powerful 'tool for change' that I have come across. From experience I know I can affect my outer form in a good way by exercise and good diet, or in a bad way by abusing my body with drugs, booze and fast food. I can also alter my mental state to the good through study or therapy, or to the bad by chemical abuse or being in a mind-

numbing occupation. But when it comes to healing my deep inner nature, because I don't even know what's wrong, there's little I can do beyond leaving it up to my creator, whoever or whatever that is – be it God, a divine spirit, or the beneficent life energy of the universe that spawned us.

Subud is efficacious in a similar way to, say, homeopathy. On paper, there is no earthly reason why either should work, but they do. If tested, a homeopathic remedy would have absolutely no trace of the original remedial substance detectable in its base liquid. This is what makes the inner essence of the substance more potent, according to homeopaths. The material aspect has been removed leaving its 'active essence'. Users have to take this on trust which can only be corroborated by outer, tangible results. Often, too (but not always), the user may feel worse at the beginning of a course of treatment before feeling any better

Sceptics put examples of homeopathy's efficacy down to 'the placebo effect', but don't actually know what that amazing phenomenon is, or how it works. And maybe Subud works in the the same, placebo-like way (or is an inherent force in nature we've forgotten about`) – but, if so, quite hoestly, who cares as long as it actually does work?

As Subud's founder (a deeply religious man, hence the references to God) said:

'The nature of God's work within you is that you are not aware of it. Progress occurs and suddenly you are aware that something has changed within you. You are not aware of the process. Suddenly, I can do this, feel that or receive this. That

is the proof or the hallmark of God's work – it is unexpected and unconscious.'

To balance the above, I have to add that sometimes the process demands action or the taking of responsibility. As Bapak once said, 'If you want a clean ashtray, stop putting ash in it.' In other words, if you understand through the latihan process that heavy drinking is bad for you, for example, you're the one who has to stop – the latihan won't 'do it for you'.

Unlike homeopathy, there are, so far, no clinical trials or scientific studies to substantiate Subud's claims, only members' testimonies which may or may not be reliable. If you want proof, one way or the other, you have to try it for yourself. It's the only way.

Analogies between spirituality and medicine continually flip into my mind as I'm writing. Heal and holy, cure and curate, the language of the medical and religious professions overlap as did their areas of operation in the past – and do so in psychotherapy today. I can quite happily, therefore, talk about Subud being a healing force. In fact, this book deals mainly with the nature of the dis-ease that I was suffering from and the slow process of its cure.

Subud makes no special claims on 'God'. It is understood that this same power has been sent to the earth in various guises before (or is innate within human beings) and still manifests in the great religions of the world (and other techniques) for those that are able to receive it. The only difference is the form. It is so

simple. There is no preparation needed in order to experience it. It requires very little input from the participant beyond ‘surrender’ (or a willingness to go with the flow) and a lot of patience.

Subud fits in with a contemporary, Western, ‘on the run’ lifestyle. As part of its process it addresses the ubiquitous ills of self-centred materialism and Western angst. Our over-developed scientific/technological brains often find the simplistic, faith-based teachings of religion tired and hard to swallow. Subud purports to bring this missing dimension of faith in the beneficence of the universe back into our lives again if we let it, and of course if we want and need it.

But it isn’t some kind of miracle. As Bapak once said, ‘Airplanes are miracles. Subud is normal.’ Think about it. Several hundred tons of metal approaching the speed of sound, six miles up, for 18 hours or more, somewhat flies in the face of physical reality. The Subud process, on the other hand, is essentially, and has always been, an inherent part of our nature, just like digesting food or sleeping. We’ve merely isolated ourselves from this inherent grace.

One of the most succinct descriptions of Subud that I’ve ever come across is in Varindra Vittachi’s book *A Special Assignment*. He wrote, ‘Subud is not a teaching, but it’s a great learning.’

To sum up, Subud is, outwardly, a regular organisation with a cohesive presence in the world. It consists solely of people that have experienced an inner contact with a universal, benign energy, as old as time, but recently sent again in a new form.

This energy comes from God, Allah, the Supreme Being, the

Life Force, the Godhead, the Universe, or merely ‘evolutionary existence’ – call it what you will.

Those of us who practise Subud’s *latihan*, its core experience, are willingly undergoing a process of change for what we trustingly perceive and believe is for the better.