

# Stranger things have happened

*Harris Smart writes...*

In January 2011 I went to Sri Lanka with my wife Piata. After 20 years of marriage, this was my first visit to my wife's country of origin.

We stayed at the very fine Subud house in Colombo and one evening the President of Subud Sri Lanka, Mr Vallipuram Sinnadorai, arranged for a group of members to stay after latihan to talk to us about Subud in Sri Lanka then and now.

The first contact with Subud came through the journalist, Varindra Vittachi. In 1957 he had an inexplicable urge to go to England. When he arrived, he went to Coombe Springs because he was a follower of the Russian sage Gurdjieff, and the Institute at Coombe Springs run by John Bennett was one of the centres continuing the work of Gurdjieff who had died in 1949.

At Coombe Springs, he found that Subud had arrived and he was opened. Apparently, before his arrival, Bapak had several times asked if there was anyone from Sri Lanka present.

Varindra was told to keep Subud to himself, but when he returned to Sri Lanka, it appears he may have opened one or two of his newspaper colleagues including the cartoonist Audrey Collette. (Varindra had an outstanding journalistic career as a champion of the free press, not only in Sri Lanka, but throughout Asia. He went on to play an important role with UNESCO, was a columnist with Newsweek, and for many years was the Chairman of the World Subud Association.)

Bapak then sent Iksan Ahmed to Sri Lanka and on December 28, 1957, he opened a number of men. Soon after, women were also opened by Mariani (BulBul) Arnold. Hundreds of people were opened altogether. Then in 1958 Bapak himself came to Sri Lanka,



*The original Sri Lanka Subud House, a colonial mansion near the sea in Colombo.*

staying from October until December. He subsequently visited Sri Lanka in 1967, 1970 and 1981.

The members rented several different properties including a magnificent colonial mansion by the sea at 38 Frankfort Place, Colombo 4. When that property became available, they purchased it in July 1974 for Rp 124,000, an insignificant sum by today's standards (about US\$1200), but a challenge in those days. The funds were partially raised by a group enterprise printing designs for saris, and then combined with some contributions by members, the money was invested in a stock market tip which paid off and gave the necessary cash to buy the house.



*The new Subud House opened in 2004 by Ibu Rahayu.*

Later, the government compulsorily acquired part of the property to widen a road running along the coast. With the compensation money, the group was able to demolish the old mansion and put up the splendid new property which was opened by Ibu Rahayu in September 2004. The architect-designed building has three storeys and includes latihan halls, meeting spaces and accommodation for visitors. The third floor is rented to a tenant, the Gem and Jewellery Association of Sri Lanka, providing a substantial income for the group's needs.

## **Welfare and Enterprise**

In 1984, Helena Goonetillecke, with the support of Dr. Robert and Dr. Indrayati, set up a health clinic in a slum area of Colombo to support poor people who, when they had to go to hospital, were often treated in an undignified way. This grew into a whole collection of welfare projects collectively known as Suhadha. It eventually included two preschools, a vocational training centre where young people were taught trades like carpentry, plumbing and sewing, and a Day Care Centre.

The project was able to partner with Susila Dharma in Germany and attracted funding from the German government. Helena recalls that the first funding application was rejected because she did not ask for enough money! When she doubled the amount asked for, the application went through. With the support of her husband Lamman, and the rest of the group, Helena maintained the projects for almost 20 years and there were many landmarks and highlights, including a visit to Singapore by a troupe of young dancers trained by the project. Fortunately, when Helena had to retire, most of the ▶



*The new stainless steel Subud symbol. It brought its maker into Subud.*

projects were continued by various branches of government.

An enterprise with a strong cultural content run by a woman is Susila Productions, run by Sandya Mendis also since 1984. The company produces television series, documentaries and corporate videos and has been extraordinarily successful, winning the award for the best Sri Lankan drama production. The company is famous for its long-running television series, usually dealing with family issues. The company employs a core staff of 14 people plus another 40 on contract.

Sandya told me, “It is often very hard to work with artists, and sometimes I feel so fed up, I'd rather do something else. But then someone will tell me how much they appreciate the work, and so I continue, and this business has taught me so much, about working with people, about money, about everything, about life.”

### Personalities

There are many stories about the “characters” and outstanding individuals who have woven the fabric of Subud in Sri Lanka.

Ronald and Rosetta Jayatillecke were particular favorites of Bapak and he stayed with them on his visits to Sri Lanka. Everyone recalls their absolute dedication to Subud and how their house was always open to Subud members and activities.

Many people also recall Rawindra Weerakoon, who was the director of CISIR (The Ceylon Institute of Science and Research) and his ability to receive insights that were helpful to the lives of other people.

Sandya recalls that for many years she was unmarried and then one evening Rawindra told her that he felt she would find a husband who was Sri Lankan, but lived in another country. He said it might take 10 years, but he was sure it would happen. Sandya said, “But I would like to have a husband now!”

Nevertheless, it was true that a few years later she met a Sri Lanka man from Canada and felt immediately, “If I wish to marry in this life, this is the man I must marry.” And she did. She remembered then what Rawindra had told her though by that time he had passed on.

Robert Goonetillecke (no relation to Helena) then told how at a certain point in his life he had decided to go to America assuming he would never return to Sri Lanka. He felt some qualms about this, particularly in terms of his responsibility to look after his parents. But Rawindra told Robert's father, that Robert would return to Sri Lanka which was a great comfort to both Robert and his father, and proved to be true.

Another character whom many recall with affectionate amusement is Rusli Sideek. On one of his visits to Sri Lanka, Bapak wanted to visit a tea plantation because he was planning to grow tea on his own farm in Indonesia. The expedition was arranged in the chauffeur-driven Cadillac of one of the members.

But Bapak said he wanted to be driven by a Subud member. Who would drive him? The only one who put up his hand was Rusli who was very small, scarcely able to see the dashboard of the car, and furthermore had very bad eyesight. Nevertheless, Bapak said that Rusli should drive. The roads into the hills were steep, narrow and winding but the journey was completed without mishap. Afterwards, Rusli said, “I did not drive the car. The car drove me.” It was the car, he insisted, not himself, that had negotiated all the tight curves.

Bapak advised Rusli that he should be a farmer, even though he had inherited very substantial business interests, including real estate, from his father. Though it was painful and risky, Rusli gave up the family business, and after a long search, located a piece of land where he began to farm livestock. A few years later the government decided to relocate the capital of Sri Lanka to some land near Rusli's and he was able to sell his farm at an enormous profit.

*I do not intend to die until we have 1000 members*



*A gathering of members at the Subud house.*



*Suhadha social project.*

Several members talked about the power of the Subud symbol which is prominent high up on the façade of the Subud house. In the beginning it was made of fiberglass, and even then Robert Goonetillecke recalled how at least one man had been attracted to Subud simply by seeing the symbol.

The president, Vallipuram, added that it was decided to replace the original symbol with something better, made of stainless steel so that it would never corrode in the salt air. The craftsmen they commissioned to make the new symbol was so moved by it that he came into Subud.

### **What Is Lacking?**

Subud members here have so much, including what must be one of the finest Subud properties in the world, and a rich his-

tory. I asked them if there was anything they wanted or needed.

Unanimously they agreed that what they needed was new members, especially young members. The membership was dwindling and ageing. We discussed the mystery of why this might be so and what might be done to correct the situation. What is within our power to do something about it, and to what extent can we only be surrendered to God?

Another thing worth bearing in mind is that Subud Sri Lanka has been a great exporter of talent to other countries – Kumari Beck, the current chair of Susila Dharma International for the second time, is one example who comes to mind – and so to some extent, more than any other country, Subud Sri Lanka has depleted its own resources in gifting to the world.

Vallipuram boldly declared, “I do not intend to die until we have 1000 members.”

To which someone responded, “Do you intend then to be immortal?”

But someone else said, “Why not? Why not?”

And someone else said, “Stranger things have happened.”

My wife and I would like to thank all the Subud members who made our stay in Sri Lanka so extremely pleasant and enriching, especially Vallipuram, and Sandya who took us out to a marvellous dinner, and Helen who gave us a wonderful traditional lunch in her beautiful house and garden. And thank you to all the other members who came that night and shared with us their memories and hopes for the future. And also to Sebastian, the caretaker at the Subud house, who looked after us with such kindness and attention.

The Subud house is imbued with the palpable and deeply peaceful feeling of a place where the latihan has sincerely been maintained for many years and there is still a strong feeling of connection with the purity of the latihan as it first began to spread in the world in the 1950s. We experienced that staying in the Colombo Subud house returned us to the pure source of the latihan. These members have kept the flame alive.

We thoroughly recommend to anyone planning to come to Sri Lanka that they should visit the Subud house.

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## Read the Voice on your iPad

In a recent issue we told you that you can download Subud Voice to your Kindle. Now Hanafi Fraval writes to say that it looks great on his iPad.

I had a look at it in his way and it does look sensational. The clarity and colour is unbeatable. A very pleasant reading experience. And so portable. You can take it with you to read anywhere, just like a book, even in the bath. (But don't drop it in the bath.)

If you are connected to the internet you can of course download the Subud Voice .pdf direct to your computer. Or Hanafi also provided this info...

“Connect the iPad to the computer in the normal way and open iTunes. Drag the SV pdf on your computer to the DEVICES section of the left column of the iTunes screen. It starts syncing automatically and a few seconds later – you have it on your iPad.”

