

The Latihan as Spiritual Adventure

By Andrew Hall

The Latihan — a Newcomer's Guide

Early in the last century, an inner-directed exercise was discovered or developed on the island of Java. Among the original small group of practitioners, this exercise was provisionally known as *kasunyatan* — meaning emptiness. During the 1950s, this exercise began to spread outside of its home country of Indonesia. By then, this exercise had become known as the *latihan kejiwa'an* (the Indonesian words for 'spiritual exercise') and the host group called itself Subud.

The exercise manifests in surprising and diverse ways for different people and is open to individual interpretation. It is not something easy to describe or categorize, but I think a useful entry point is to consider the Subud latihan as a type of meditation exercise. I personally view the latihan as a kind of moving meditation.

A common characteristic of meditation is that it involves an altered state of consciousness. This happens in the latihan too: people have compared being in latihan to how an athlete feels 'in the zone' or to how artists feel when they are completely at one with the act of creating and no longer have a separate will. Or even to how a mystic feels.

The latihan is one of many practices that people have followed with varying success and I encourage newcomers to try the Subud latihan for themselves if they are curious.

The Latihan as Meditation

Practicing meditation is common across the centuries and found in many cultures around the world today. Perhaps the place to start is to consider why meditation in general is so widespread, especially in religious traditions. And why in today's world do people completely outside those traditions want to try meditation? What are they looking for? And what motivates those who keep on meditating, who take up a meditation practice?

There is a range of explanations that run from the well-recognized immediate and cumulative benefits of meditation on one's physical and emotional health, on up to the desire for spiritual transformation. Meditation covers a lot of ground. People are looking for different outcomes and seem to experience different benefits. I think the same range of outcomes is claimed by people who do the latihan.

So how is the Subud latihan different or similar to other meditation exercises? Good question. As someone who is not very familiar with other types of meditation, this answer is going to be very incomplete and provisional. But here goes.

I think there are two major points to consider when comparing the latihan with other types of meditation.

First, the Subud latihan is about letting go. It is not about focusing the attention but about letting go and dissociating. The latihan technique is called surrender. You surrender your will, surrender your intellect, surrender your perceptions — you continually try to surrender everything, whatever comes into your consciousness, even your awareness of yourself.

Surrender is the traditional word used to describe the latihan technique and it has a certain resonance in the original cultural context of the latihan. But this word, 'surrender', may or may not work today for people who swim in a different cultural milieu. So don't get hung up on surrender. It is just a word and something else might work better for you. Try saying different words to yourself — words like 'letting go', 'opening', or 'waiting', or 'listening', or (my favourite) 'trust in the mystery', or any other words that convey the idea of not making an effort, and letting yourself be open, of not having any expectations. (Of course you are making a minimal effort, but at the same time your intention is to let go.)

How this process unfolds is the subjective experience of each individual, and to me that seems to depend on what the person brings to the latihan and what they are looking for.

Second, another major aspect of the latihan, when comparing it to more common types of meditation where you sit or lie quietly and the body is relatively still, is that people doing the latihan are usually making spontaneous movements and sounds. Some may see a similarity with spontaneous chi kung.

These latihan movements and sounds are completely individual, and can vary enormously. To an outside observer, it might look like a scene from Bedlam, with people wandering around randomly, singing and making odd noises and movements.

The founder of Subud talked about 'waking up' the body parts in the latihan. My personal experience is that when doing latihan, my awareness of my physical body and consciousness is different in subtle ways. I become like a witness, and watch my body turning and stretching and feel a delicious aliveness. I find the latihan gets me out of my head and I now consider it a healthy way to counterbalance the over-reliance on head stuff, the soup of ideas and words that I normally swim in during my daily life as a knowledge worker in an office tower. My body can feel intuition or guidance, whatever one may call it.

The Practicalities

One of the things that struck me about the latihan from the very beginning was the lack of ceremony. Hardly anything is said, people are present in a group, but more in a sense of parallel play than of doing anything consciously together.

Having said that, there is structure and method to a group latihan session.

First, latihan begins with a quiet period where people sit and become quiet. This varies but is customarily about fifteen minutes. This is important to settle the mind chatter, the swirl of emotions and thoughts that most of us continually process.

The second part is the latihan exercise. People stand with their eyes closed, usually in a circle, someone says 'begin' (sometimes they will first say 'relax' and then 'begin'). This starts the latihan. People then begin to move about, sometimes making sounds or singing. This can change to standing quietly, or to lying on the floor. There is a lot of variety. The typical length is usually thirty minutes. At the end, the person who started the latihan will say 'finish' and if they are moved, they might say 'relax' and then 'finish'.

The third part is again sitting quietly, usually for at least five minutes, more if necessary, to be quiet and readjust to normal consciousness.

That is pretty well it. The important thing is the subjective experience of each person.

In addition to the group latihan, it is certainly possible and many people do practice latihan on their own. It is also possible to feel a spontaneous latihan feeling during the day while occupied with your daily tasks. But for a newcomer, it may be more helpful to start with the group exercise.

What You Bring to the Latihan

Why does anyone seek spiritual growth? Perhaps they have an intuition that there is something more? There are people who feel the universe is sometimes sending them messages. Perhaps you are one of them. Or perhaps you are just curious and interested in trying something different. Others may want to do something because someone else is doing it. These are all familiar points of departure.

The people who came before you also began from starting points like these, with a variety of motivations and assumptions about what is possible. Why is this important? Because our assumptions and aspirations can colour our experience. That may sound trite, vague and open-ended, but I think it is true. And I think it is the obvious place to start.

Whatever you are thinking about or whatever assumptions you carry around with you can influence what you find or where you end up. Like nature itself, this is not an iron law, but it is worth keeping in mind, and not only for yourself. We can usually see the blind spots, the prejudices and preconceptions of others, in other words their assumptions, more clearly than our own.

Perhaps you are comfortable with ideas like, 'as you sow, so shall you reap', or 'if you hunger and thirst for righteousness, then you will eventually be filled with righteousness', that sort of thing. (These assumptions or ideas may not be your starting point; they are just examples that come from my own background where Bible reading was important. Read whatever holy books or poetry you feel drawn to and find text that resonates for you.) Only you can figure out where you are, by being your own witness, and bringing into your awareness the assumptions you carry and which will influence what is possible for you.

For most of us, our motivations and ideas change and evolve over time. This is completely normal, so don't get too hung up thinking about what your motivations and reasoning are at this moment. But you will probably find it worthwhile to think about them.

To me, it is essential that self-knowledge be the centre of the spiritual path. This doesn't mean that you need to know all the answers about yourself, no one does, but I personally think that becoming your own witness is more than beneficial, it is essential.

The Importance of Intention

While the latihan technique is about letting go, there is always the question of how much effort to put into it. The latihan technique is about surrender, but that still requires some level of awareness and intention beforehand so you know what you are doing and what you want to do.

There are two aspects to this. One is what happens in the latihan exercise, which is where you make some degree of effort to surrender, or (as some prefer to describe it) where you make no effort and just surrender. The other is your intention, or awareness of what you are doing, which happens beforehand. My own understanding is that because the latihan technique is passive and lacks willful force, that the intention and awareness beforehand are probably more important than ever. They point you in a certain direction and look at what's ahead, beyond your immediate awareness. At that

point, you let go and surrender.

You should know this is my own personal understanding about the importance of intention and this view is not shared by everyone. There is a range of views. For instance, one long-time latihan practitioner says this:

In my experience, before the latihan becomes established, making an effort to surrender just gets in the way, and after it becomes established, effort is unnecessary: the latihan is always there; you just let it out.

Another long-time latihan practitioner puts it this way:

The question for me is not the absence of trying but which 'trying' needs to be present in order to 'let go'....Then there is the question of thought. What thoughts are to be let go? For me those are the brain babble thoughts, the thoughts that grab our attention and carry us away from paying attention to letting go and passively observing our body's moments if any are occurring or even our body's state. The analogy for this kind of attention is like watching a pool become totally flat as the wavelets subside once the wind is removed. So the attention is a function of an aware observer. The question then is: 'Is being aware and observing *thinking?*' I certainly think that it is a mind activity and a state that I need to try to attain.... I think that I have a job to do in the latihan and that I not only have the intention to do it prior to latihan but also within the discipline of latihan itself.

To which our first practitioner responds:

I've never found that thinking slows down my latihan. While doing latihan this afternoon, I began by being more self-aware and then my mind drifted off and the next thing I noticed was that my latihan had become much stronger. I think my inner is more free when there is no observer monitoring its activity. Once my latihan becomes stronger and deeper, my mind becomes quieter anyway, so it's the latihan itself that quietens the mind. For me, there is no need for effort.

As you can see, there are different perspectives. I think what is important for the newcomer is to realize that the latihan is not about achieving pristine awareness. It's far more dreamy and sloppy, but it is not haphazard.

To repeat, my own experience is that coming to the latihan with some sort of intention is important but, as you can see, there is some difference of opinion. As with everything else I talk about in this article, you will need to find out for yourself.

Here is what another long-time practitioner of the latihan has to say after reading the previous exchanges:

It fascinates me that everything described so far about the nitty-gritty of others' latihan is in my latihan. I need to pay attention some of the time, and when I remember, I can switch my mind off (though usually in the last ten minutes when I stop moving/making sounds); allowing my thinking to run (a) strengthens the movements and sounds and (b) that's when all kinds of creative ideas and deeper understanding occurs....

It often seems to go in three roughly ten minute stages: much movement and sounds (often with 'ethnic' qualities); then a period of ideas and deeper understandings; then my mind switches off and I feel a lightness and contentedness — accompanied by gratitude and an 'all's well with the world' feeling; I assume this is what a religious type would call worship.

Sometimes in the last minutes, I sense fleetingly that there is something huge of which I am a tiny part.

When I look around outside Subud I think I see that intention is a well-trod path in the contemplative tradition. The author of the medieval classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing* with remarkably modern language talks about your 'naked intent direct to God' and that is a pretty good statement of intention. You are laying it on the line.

We are all individuals and how this works is different in each person's experience. To give you some idea of the possible dynamics at work, here is what another different long-time latihan practitioner has to say:

For the first 30+ years my mind babbled a lot in and out of latihan. Then sometime in the last ten years I started to read Eckhart Tolle and books on cognitive-behavioral therapy and realized that if I was going to ever overcome my depression I would have to learn to control my mind — that was my main motivation, to be happier. However, to my surprise, I discovered that somewhere along the line I had gained the power to turn my mind off and on like a light-switch (I credit the latihan for this).

Naturally I tried it out in latihan and was pleased that it felt right. My latihan pretty much proceeded as before, but with some gains. The quietness allowed for more insights and guidance to come during latihan. I started to receive more guidance in the form of visualizations. I also started to receive more understanding of what the movements and experiences I have during latihan mean. Outside of latihan it is similar — an increase in guidance and understanding that comes easily and naturally, usually without the need to stop and test. Then there's some little extras, like an increase in psychic connection with family and friends, more synchronicities, more dreams and information about past lives and their impact on this life, more helpful dreams, and so on.

If someone had told me that I needed to turn off my mind to do latihan in the beginning, it would've been hopeless. Apparently I did need to hear that advice eventually, but it was only useful at the point when my inner was strong enough to pull it off. For me it did involve some small amount of decision, intention, and trying.

I think that everyone doing the latihan is dealing with the same issues, (1) being aware of or making an intention beforehand, and (2) letting the latihan process happen. There are probably no final answers. Learning is an iterative process. We are always moving back and forth, being aware of our intention, and learning how to be aware of and commit to our surrender.

The wider issue that everyone also needs to find their own answer to is how much effort is worthwhile when seeking transcendence, or following any spiritual practice. Where does the amount of effort become problematic? What is the right balance? How to give something the importance it needs and not neglect other needs? Any spiritual community or individual practitioner needs to deal with this and find an appropriate balance.

How much energy and time are you willing to devote to your practice, to your search? And just how patient and diligent are you? Results do not usually happen quickly.

Finding a Balance

Perhaps this issue is not so much about finding a balance, which I think is an individual matter, but more about avoiding extremes. Going to extremes seems to trap people

and groups all the time. In fact, going overboard, the risk of falling into extremes, seems to have been a part of mankind's psyche since it all began.

During the time of the Ancient Greeks, at the temple to Apollo in Delphi, men sought the counsel of an oracle. Delphi is an amazing place, where the land sweeps up from the sea, and the cliffs above hang from the sky. In such a place, the Greeks either recognized or created a sacred space, and then came for many centuries to ask a priestess to channel counsel from Apollo, the Greek God of music, healing, poetry, prophecy and truth.

What was the experience of these people who went to Delphi? What did the Greeks know about the human psyche? As these men (I think they were mostly men) stood and puzzled at the oracular responses they received, surrounding them in the rock portico of the temple wall were these three maxims: (1) know thyself, (2) nothing in excess, and (3) make a pledge and mischief is nigh. What level of awareness does a culture have that would put these three admonitions in a space where people came to encounter the Divine? I am struck by the stress on the importance of self-knowledge and avoiding extremes, lessons which I think our own culture has sometimes forgotten.

Notice the warning about the consequences of making a pledge. I imagine people who came to Delphi often faced personal crises, just as we do today, and were probably desperate enough to promise the Gods anything. Maybe the Greeks recognized that a promise made in desperate circumstances creates its own mischievous karma? (Of course, we are not privy to all the assumptions the ancient Greeks had, only what they wrote about, so our understanding is probably incomplete.)

Showing Good Faith

To me, faith is about taking action, nothing more mysterious than that. Without taking an action, you are staying at the level of words and ideas. Words and ideas, thinking and communicating, are an important dimension of our existence but I suggest faith is about actually being in this world in a more grounded way.

To use an example — showing charity to others — is it not more powerful to actually do something, like get off your ass and out the door and volunteer at the local food bank? Rather than just sit around and talk about it?

The key is that when you take action, that you do it in what I call 'good faith'. The plain truth in this life is that if you are going to get anywhere, no matter what it is, like finding a job, you will need to commit yourself to taking an action, to doing something in a whole-hearted and serious way.

Let's bring this back to the Subud latihan. If you want to see if the latihan practice is worth doing, you need to do it in good faith, and give the practice and yourself a decent chance to see what happens.

This does not mean surrendering your critical judgment, but you will need to do the latihan unreservedly, and you can't do that if your critical judgment creates a conflict within you. The critical judgment can, and should, come afterwards. However, when doing the latihan, you have to surrender and do it in good faith.

Let me emphasize that I am *not* saying that acting in good faith means surrendering your judgment or your responsibility to make up your own mind. I mean the exact opposite.

Thinking about the latihan and what you experience in the latihan can and will

inevitably come afterwards. During the latihan, the focus is on letting the thinking mind go and surrendering, and then witnessing what you experience.

Let me return to the idea of balance. The key is finding a balance, finding how to achieve a balance within yourself and in your life, so you can do the latihan practice in good faith and still exercise your rational, skeptical mind so that you make decisions that you are comfortable with.

I think the latihan can be very useful to counter the imbalance in modern life where people are so used to rational thinking that they think or assume it is the only real mode of existence. The latihan is not about thinking and is not done with thinking. People can and do think in the latihan, that is inevitable, but the focus of the exercise is on letting go and surrendering on all our levels of awareness — physical, emotional, and mental. As you go more deeply into the latihan experience thoughts and feelings will come to your awareness but you just surrender them and let them go. The idea is to not give them more energy than they have.

Conclusion

To me, life is not about finding absolute and final answers, it is about being open and searching. I think the best approach to the latihan is the same way we ought to approach life. Have the courage to take risks and be willing to risk making mistakes. Be willing to admit and learn from failure. Mistakes and failure are a big, important and worthwhile part of life. Why should our religious or spiritual life be any different?

I hope this brief introduction to the latihan gives the reader some idea of the practicalities and the possibilities. Every person has to decide for themselves if the latihan practice is worth pursuing. There are other resources about the latihan available on the Internet and in person. I urge people who are curious to investigate these. The quality varies but I am sure you will find something of value.

In conclusion, I would like to go the level of metaphor. We people who do the latihan are a small and insignificant part of the human journey, a journey that extends from past millennia and across the world today. Like everyone else, we wander in the same pathless land where humans have always trod, searching for meaning and significance, inspired by truth and love.