

# Responding to the Helpers

By Andrew Hall

In May of 2006, three international helpers spent a week in eastern Canada. Afterwards, a report was sent to the groups. This article is a reaction to that report.

The first time I read the report my immediate response was to feel hurt and angry. I want to talk about why this happened and try to say something useful about it.

Let me start by sharing with readers what the report says. The following quotes give, I think, a fair representation of the report's tone and contents:

*[In two of the Subud groups] there were good feelings and social activities among the members but the dewan or group was not meeting regularly and working together in accordance with God's guidance to create activities and group life that would impact both the members as well as the non-Subud community; in both cases, the groups were stuck, in-grown, and not growing.*

After noting that several members from one of these groups participated in a choir at the regional gathering held during the helpers' visit, the report goes on:

*...God willing, the group can use its talents and energy to manifest the fruits of the latihan in the world. Testing in [the other group] showed that there is a need for the dewan to meet in a more business-like way, with a facilitator and an agenda and to test possible directions for the group so that it is more aligned with God's will for the group's growth and development.*

*Testing regarding the needs of the members indicated the deep need for purification, and ultimately quiet lightness and connection to God that the latihan, by God's grace, can give.*

*In general it seems that most groups are 'getting by', some better than others, and that most helpers and committee people are doing relatively competent work in their roles, but that there is room for improvement. The main lack appears to be an over reliance on socialization and on heart/mind and personal opinion with not enough contact with and input from the latihan or God's power.... Members or 'not-yet-members' seeking the latihan can find their fill of talk anywhere.*

*The central need for Subud Canada overall at this time seems to be for more contact with and guidance from God's power.*

Reading it now, I wonder who the report was intended for and what did it accomplish? Life has gone on, and I wonder if the report has had any effect on Subud life in our region.

The following comments are more specific.

## Judgements and Criticisms

There are a number of judgements in the report. For instance, it describes two of the groups as stuck, in-grown and not growing and complains that there is too much reliance on socializing.

I wish it was clearer who is making these judgements: the international helpers, the national helpers, the local helpers, or all three? Are these descriptions or judgements the result of testing? If so, who tested, and what were the questions?

I wonder, do readers feel the report implies the local groups are not aware of this, or are not doing enough about it?

I am prompted to ask why we spend most of our limited funds in Subud to promote helper travel? I think the best rationale for helper travel is to empower local members.

Judgements, whether negative or positive, do not empower people.

A different approach, one less likely to provoke a defensive response would have been to observe and report on what happened during the visit and talk about it.

For example, where the report describes the groups as stuck and in-grown, it would be easier for me to accept if it had said something like, "The international and national helpers tested with the local group about how open they were to new members. Some concerns were expressed that the group was stuck and this led to a discussion of attempts that had been made to reach out to applicants and new members."

If visiting helpers feel the need to go beyond what they observe and add their own assessment of what is happening, I would prefer that they clearly state that it is their judgement and offer as much information as necessary to explain it.

This could be valuable information. From travelling around to different Subud groups in different circumstances, the helpers may have gained a particular perspective and insight that is worth sharing with others.

### **Subud "Best Practices"**

The report mentions the lack of regular *dewan* and group meetings and it links this to its conclusion that the groups are stuck and in-grown. The purpose of *dewan* and group meetings, says the report, is to create activities and group life that will be good for members as well as the non-Subud community.

The mention of regular *dewan* meetings struck a chord with me. During the helpers' visit, I expressed exasperation at how difficult it seemed to be for our men and women helpers to meet.

I suppose I should have felt justified after this issue of *dewan* meetings was highlighted in the report.

However, I dislike generalized and anonymous judgements and would again prefer to have heard something based on their own observations, such as: "From our visits to many groups, we feel that those groups that are doing better at creating an environment for the members to grow spiritually are the groups that hold regular *dewan* and group meetings." If this is indeed true???

If anything, I was disappointed that the issues of *dewan* and group meetings was not discussed during or after the visits. Would it have made a difference? Worth a try, I think.

Perhaps there could have been a discussion about the continual difficulty of getting these meetings off the ground and the different feelings that helpers and members have about this.

Perhaps the helpers could have shared stories about those local groups that are managing to hold regular *dewan* and group meetings and who feel they are actually having the effect of fostering the activities and group life that this report talks about.

A few concrete examples would do more, I think, to encourage and empower our groups than the judgement that we are not doing it and should be.

Or, if the lack of regular *dewan* and group meetings is a general problem across many groups, then that is also useful information. We are not the only ones struggling with this!

Maybe what would help is a list of “best practices” for Subud groups based on actual examples, e.g. groups that do have regular *dewan* and group meetings.

Reminding people that they are failing, and making people feel guilty about missing opportunities to act in “accordance with God’s guidance” is not that likely to be well received or to really accomplish anything.

Guilt is a lousy motivator.

### **Socializing Versus Spirituality**

The report’s final two paragraphs describe the regional gathering that took place during the helpers’ visit. Here is what was said:

*... an excellent turnout, and the presence of a large contingent of members from the west made for a ‘more than a regional’ feeling, and the workshops and entertainment evenings gave plenty of opportunity for participation. There was plenty of life evident in the performances of the many members who took part: there was music, singing, salsa dancing, and an hilarious English ‘Panto’...hugely enjoyed by players and audience alike.*

*In general, Camp Kawartha was a wonderful social gathering, but a bit devoid of the connection to God except when we were engaged in latihan, kejiwaan activities, and sharing culture.*

This is how the report ends. Pretty abrupt and callous, was my reaction. To have the gathering judged as “a bit devoid of the connection to God” struck me as pretty hard.

How ungenerous, I said to myself. This regional gathering was an absolutely wonderful event for the sixty Subud members who were there. For many of them, it was a rich, joyous experience, a time to connect with old friends and a chance to feel enveloped in the Subud community.

Some of these Subud members are materially poor, and they spend their limited funds to attend this gathering. It is a considerable cost for them. This is the one time each year that our region comes together in a major (for us) gathering.

We need joy, celebration, laughter and ecstasy to make our lives meaningful. Social activities—activities like group singing and theatricals—nourish us; they feed our hearts and minds. I want people to go away from this type of Subud event feeling good and completely satisfied with life.

In other times and places, Subud has been criticized because people said it didn’t pay enough attention to our need for community. So when a gathering lets people soak in the community feeling they’ve been starving for, it’s now a problem?

Again, an anonymous judgement that suggests we are doing something wrong, is unhelpful. In this case, it seems way off-base and anyone from my region who read this report was almost certainly offended.

Isn't it entirely possible that the joy we feel in socializing comes from our inner and is the fruit of our latihan?

Might not these good feelings and social activities be evidence of the latihan's presence in our lives? I didn't know that social activities can interfere with feeling the latihan, if that's what the writer was implying.

## **Conclusion**

How does the latihan manifest itself in our lives? To me, this report seems to suggest that we need to be constantly manifesting piety. And that we are not testing enough.

What does it really mean to speak of "not enough contact with and input from the latihan or God's power"?

In publishing this article I am trying to point out practical ways that this report and its writer(s) could have taken a different tack, one that is more respectful, and more helpful and empowering for the Subud groups they visit.

A common Subud reaction to something like this report, something that we don't like or feel is off-base, is to chalk it up to "purification" and move on.

You could say this article is my own purification. Reading this report reminds me of the passivity and guilt that I felt growing up in a Christian fundamentalist Protestant church. Guilt was freely passed around, and it seemed that sermons took pains to emphasize how hopeless life is for us with all our shortcomings and limitations. I don't want Subud to end up like this.

I think the report and the assumptions it contains need to be challenged.

For me, Subud in the world is a work in progress. I look forward to comments by others.