

Latihan Communities and Organization: a Dialogue

By Helissa Penwell and Sahlan Diver

Introduction:

Like most everyone else in Subud, I've been watching members leave my group. I've been hearing of whole Subud groups disappearing. And, yet, I've also been hearing that many of the people who have left still do latihan on their own or with friends and family. Some people have started new groups not affiliated with Subud, and some are talking about wanting to start groups in the future. I wonder where it is all headed. I wonder how we can adapt ourselves and an organization to accommodate changing circumstances. Instead of feeling sad that things haven't turned out as we imagined they would, can we open up to something new? Can we design an organization that serves the people doing latihan — in and out of Subud — in a way that supports them and helps the latihan spread?

When confronted with such important issues, I often find a discussion with Sahlan helpful. He allows me to have my say, but he insists that I be clear and think through my ideas. The conversation takes on a life of its own, and we both seem to change as it unfolds. I end up with a whole new set of insights and an emerging sense of clarity. We thought you might enjoy reading one of our exchanges.

— H.P.

HP:

Sahlan, lately, some of Subud Vision's authors, you included, have been speculating about what kind of organization we will need in the future, or if we'll need one at all.

I suspect that from now on there will be a strong pull on people to start new local groups that are based on some belief system or common idea with the latihan added on. We already see that with Rose's group, vegetarianism+latihan. The lady we opened here who did not wish to be a member of Subud and her friend, who is a member, suggested an Eckhart Tolle group who also did the latihan. My daughter said it would be a relatively easy matter to open yoga or tai chi classes to an additional half hour of 'freeform exercise', which would be regular latihan to us.

There could be Buddhist+latihan groups or even meditation+latihan groups (doing each separately), or gay and lesbian community groups who did latihan. Well, you get the idea, the number of different groups could be endless. It might help spread the latihan, and there is something to be said for pairing the latihan with a community that is based on ideas that help hold it together.

One of the things my husband and I have been discussing lately is that the latihan doesn't seem to work very well unless one pairs it with some system that helps one 'work on oneself' outside the latihan, like psychology — something that aids your outer growth and development and provides a moral/ethical system for behavior, etc. while the latihan does its work from the inside. So, maybe going in this direction isn't a bad idea, but I suppose it depends on what you pair the latihan with as to the outcome.

Michael Irwin's 'Wayward' sets it up to have numerous pairings with a common latihan. That's one way to go, rather than have separate groups all over the city.

Do you see this development as good or bad? Would an overall organization want to work against this happening? Or, would the org simply want to be an umbrella for all the varieties of latihan groups? Would you want the latihan to be held together, or would the org just loosely keep the various groups connected? I would guess that even if there were many groups available doing separate latihan, there would always be purist groups that did only latihan with no other attachments. So, would the org represent the purists only, perhaps with the other groups being secondary? What's the org's role?

Lots of ways to go with this. What do you think?

SD:

I would ask: 'What about those people who aren't into spiritual vegetarianism, or Tolle, or meditation, or lesbian interests — the majority of the population, in fact?' Do you remember our anonymous author, 'Old Timer', saying he/she would like to think in the future there'd be a latihan room at every airport? — that's the model I'd be looking at, not specifically that facility, but a latihan that truly was for 'all of mankind', where the latihan was an activity that stood by itself, not attached to any belief system.

HP:

So, you'd be a 'purist' then. Maybe I would be, too.

I see a need for a group of latihaners who aren't paired with any particular belief system or label — you know, how Subud was supposed to be — so that:

(1) There would be a place anyone could come to be opened and do latihan — in Rose's group you'd have to be a vegetarian to be welcome.

Clearly, some people would prefer this purist kind of group. Also, if someone had a falling out with his other group, he'd have a place to go. If you moved and there wasn't a Tolle+latihan group in the area, you'd have a place to go, etc.

(2) They would maintain the integrity of the latihan, making certain it wasn't mixed with another spiritual practice at the time of latihan, e.g. prescribed chanting while latihan.

(3) They could function as a resource to the other groups — giving advice about problems, or providing latihan if a group felt it was going off track and needed a tune-up, etc.

On the other hand, I'm enticed by the notion of meeting for latihan with a group of like-minded people every week. Awhile back I was thinking if it ever was time for the latihan to go viral, I could join one or more of the various meet-up groups in Sacramento that are focused on my interests, such as psychology, Tolle, or gnosticism. It sounds fun to form a community of people where some of our core beliefs are the same. I'm not opposed to tribes. They can be satisfying, as long as they are designed to promote individual growth and expression. I'd definitely consider starting something like that.

So, say the latihan spreads in both ways through 'pure' latihan groups and 'paired' latihan groups. Would they all be under your organization's umbrella? Or, would you only be interested in organizing the pure form? Would the org have any authority over the various groups, or would it mostly be a social acknowledgement of having the latihan in common?

SD:

I think we have to be realistic about this. Yes, in some places like-minded people will get together and form a latihan + X group, and there is nothing wrong with that, as such. But an organization, if dedicated to promoting a latihan that is available to all without any obstacle of belief or alignment, would not I think find it advisable to expend resources on such groups in preference to neutral groups that anyone could

feel a place in — it does not need to be against them, it's just that such special groups would not fall within its remit.

As regards authority, the model I am interested in is more of a resource to help the groups and help the spread of the latihan. This can't work without a certain amount of consistency that is agreed upon by the participating groups. Someone who moves house from an area where latihans are single sex, twice weekly, to another area where there are mixed two-hour latihans every fortnight might find it difficult to adapt, for example. Some kind of 'norm' is required, — and also to prevent local 'gurus' and forceful personalities pushing their own agenda. This was the difficulty I was addressing in my recent editorial: if people agree that some kind of norm is a good idea, then how do they decide what the norm should be? One way would be to say just continue Subud traditional practise of two latihans per week. Of all the things we hear complained about in Subud, the standard rules for the practise of the latihan is not one of them. Or, imitate what comparable practices such as yoga do — once-weekly meetings. People can usually diligently attend an activity once a week, but ask them to attend twice a week and you'd probably get a rapid falling away of interest. Another possibility is to rent small town-centre premises where people could drop in at one or more of a range of convenient times on offer and do latihan with whoever was there. This could work if you had a lot of members, and members could phone each other to organise their own times for mini-group-within-a-group latihans.

HP:

The new org could be a parent organization. It would open people and get them started. They could choose to stay with the org, or fly the nest to start their own groups. If they did that, then the parent group would have no authority or official/legal connection with them, but they could maintain social ties and communication, if they both wished. The parent would always be there to give advice and support when they asked for it, and it would be a place to 'come home to' when needed. There would be no fostering of jealousy or competitiveness between the org and its offspring. The parent org would promote an attitude of respect and allowing people to make their own choices without trying to control them. It would see the formation of new groups as a way of getting more people doing latihan, and that that is a good thing, rather than trying to keep people on its own membership lists and under its supervision.

The difference between that and Subud is that Subud is possessive of the latihan. It would be opposed to someone starting their own group, unless that group were a clone of Subud. It actively discourages anyone from 'breaking away'. It only welcomes returning ex-members as long as they convert back to the faith. The idea of giving the latihan away and losing control of it scares most helpers.

What do you think?

SD:

Yes, I agree.

An organisation, in order to work, has to have clear guidelines and ideas, even where these may be relatively lightweight. And even where an organisation has a flexible approach it would still have an idea of the constraints within which such flexibility would be okay or not. So if people want to go off and form their own groups, it does not need to be possessive or jealous or dismissive, but at the same time, suppose it had a source of funding, it would not fund such groups. Some people might want to form a latihan+psychoanalysis group, for example. The org might be interested in their experiences but it would not fund a group that required a compulsory and active interest in psychoanalysis, because that would break the principle of neutrality and

limit access to the latihan.

HP:

And I agree, also.

My main point is that we need a change of attitude. Subud has been running on fear for a long time now. We fear the power of the latihan and we fear people's individuality. We fear allowing members to receive and follow their own guidance.

We want to keep an eye on them and their latihan; we want to keep it all under one roof, so that we can feel we have some control. And by 'we' I mean mostly the helpers and the hierarchy.

Well, look where that attitude has gotten us. Maybe we need to trust more — trust that it will somehow work out all right, as long as we act responsibly. We set up a parent org that's built on providing latihan to people, that is simple and neutral. We make clear our intentions, know our parameters, set up guidelines that are transparent and easily understood. Then we open people, and we expect that a few will stay and most will leave. Once someone is opened, he owns his latihan, and what he does with it is his business, and we are all right with that. Sure, we can expect there to be some experimenting, and not all of it will be good, but, who knows, some of it may help us evolve. But, nothing will happen if we don't open up and start passing the latihan on without so many strings. We can continue to set an example and give good advice, and even give support when asked for, but, well, if people want to go their own way, then that is to be expected.

Of course, Subud members could decide to change their attitudes, and all of this could happen without forming a new org. I have trouble seeing that happen, though.

SD:

I don't think this is describing the real problem. What you say above could be describing Subud as it is at the moment. We are not some fanatical cult that tracks down members who leave and checks up on what they are doing with the latihan. Most leave. We know that. Some members have left and taken the latihan elsewhere, without interference from Subud, e.g. Osho. And if people leave Subud for something else, then come back, they are almost always welcomed back without censure.

The real problem of possessiveness is the attitude not towards the members who have left, but towards those who *haven't* left. Subud wants to dictate what they consider spiritually important and valid. Yes, we've heard all the arguments about it's optional and just advice, but if it really had such casual importance the whole culture of Subud would be different — the helpers wouldn't feel obliged to check everything by Bapak's advice, there would be no constant references to Bapak in Subud publications and web sites, no slavishly following the minutiae of his advice (apart from 'enterprise' which has been conveniently forgotten about by common consent), no testing of the influence of the lower forces (an idea that is not universal, but comes from Indonesia), and so on (see my article in this issue listing 90+ commonly accepted beliefs in Subud!).

That's one reason why I suggested in a Subud Vision solution that we abandon the necessity for people to 'join' Subud. If you don't have a membership, you can't expect people to be signing up for or tacitly identifying themselves with a whole set of principles. Even the name 'Subud' implies that its members subscribe to an intention to be '*susila budhi dharma*'. This is a religious and philosophical alignment — there is no neutrality about it — we openly and proudly state what it means. I am not saying

that SBD is wrong — the aims are noble, but they do represent an imposition of one idea on the practitioners of an exercise that is supposed to be for ‘all of mankind’ regardless of personal belief. What Subud is really saying is that it is for all those of mankind who are willing to align with Subud’s declared aims and philosophy. Worse, the philosophy is not an openly stated, written down, fixed philosophy but something that is woven into the oral tradition and habits of thought of the members. I wrote an editorial once, called ‘Subud-upmanship’, which lampooned the common thought patterns that condition how members come to judge everything through a distorting ‘Subud’ lens, but, more seriously, it is precisely those thought patterns that suffocate individuality of thought and opinion, and must surely lead to so many leaving after they have eventually ‘had their fill’ of Subud. By contrast, I have never heard anyone complain they have ‘had their fill of the latihan’.

HP:

I agree with your comments concerning the pressure we put on members to sign on to a whole set of religious and philosophical principles, and that this must factor in so many members leaving. That is a core problem with Subud, but it is not the one I’m focusing on here. I’m talking about a change in attitude about the relationship between Subud, the organization, and the latihan. The two are practically synonymous in many people’s minds. It was that way from the beginning, as Bapak often talked about them interchangeably. What if, instead, we began to think of Subud and the latihan as separate from each other, and then begin to look at ways we can support (1) people’s continuing to do latihan after they leave Subud, (2) people starting groups that are not officially affiliated with Subud, and (3) people gaining access to the latihan without contact with Subud?

We all accept that most members leave Subud. But, the usual reaction at the group level, especially among helpers, is to resist this fact. They do and say a lot to keep people coming to group latihan. If someone believes that is best, then I’m fine with them making their case for it and speaking from their own experience in order to persuade someone else to keep coming to group latihans. However, if that’s the only argument allowed, and other opinions can’t be voiced, then that creates a culture where there’s only one right way to do latihan, and that way is to be active in Subud. I know too many friends who have left and still do latihan who are doing just fine to believe that.

So, I’d like a change of attitude — more openness, acceptance, and supportiveness for people’s choice to leave the group *before* they leave. When I’ve talked with applicants and new members, I always bring up the possibility that at some time they might decide, for any number of reasons, not to continue with group latihans. We discuss how they could still fit the practice of latihan into their lives, either by themselves or with friends. We talk about how they’d always be welcomed back at any time, and that they can always call to speak with one of us. I let them know that I respect their choice in the matter and don’t prejudge it as a terrible mistake, which would only shut the door on a further relationship with them, if they should leave.

The situation is similar with members leaving Subud to start groups not connected with Subud. We know it happens, but we frown on it. We try to talk them out of doing it. We tend not to have anything to do with them, if they do. We might even question the quality of their latihans, if they’re not done under our roof. But, maybe it’s time for us to let this attitude go too. Maybe we’re holding on so tight to overseeing the latihan that we’re preventing it from spreading.

Now (2) and (3) are more radical than just preparing someone to do latihan on their own. They’re also connected to your idea of not having a membership. I’m suggesting that we consider passing the latihan on to communities who want it

without requiring that they join Subud, or maintain any ties to Subud. It could greatly facilitate the spread of the latihan, although the results might very well be mixed. What are the risks, and are they worth it?

Here's an example of what I'm thinking, but I'm sure you can think of hundreds of other groups for other examples. So let's say, some members of the local gay and lesbian community are opened. Some of their friends are interested in their spiritual practice. As it is now, those friends would be told by the helpers to become applicants and join Subud. But, that's not what they want. They just want to do latihan within their own community. So, why don't we work with the first gays to get it started. We could assist in the openings and participate in the latihans until we felt they were doing well, or we were asked to leave. They would continue to open people on their own. We could offer to maintain an open line of communication with their community, if they wanted that, and offer support, advice, or help, if asked. We wouldn't have any control over their group and they wouldn't be in Subud, but a lot more people might be doing latihan. It might even spread to other gay communities. It could be a 'gay thing' even. Why not, if that helps make it attractive? They wouldn't necessarily follow Subud's 'rules' and they would decide how to organize themselves. They might come up with something superior to our organization, or not.

I know — the idea can be scary or exciting. Maybe both. But, I wonder if it isn't the 'next step' in making the latihan available 'for all mankind'.

SD:

Your email puts forward several separate ideas. I'll comment on them one by one.

Let's get out of the way first a point I agree with you on, that if people don't want to come to group latihan for a bit or even for a long time, they should not be pre-judged, that there should be more acceptance of and respect for their decision, a willingness to discuss without cutting the person off. I think you are asking for less panic and more flexibility on this matter. And suggesting that in the long run people may continue with latihan for a much longer time if less pressure is put on them.

There is the idea that people should be 'supported' if they just wish to do latihan on their own. Does this support go beyond just a simple acceptance, as above? People who don't come to group latihan at all usually have strong reasons, which can include infirmity, time and expense of travel, an argument that has occurred with another member, and so on. If the helpers believe that group latihan is stronger and more beneficial, then it seems to me they have a duty to ascertain whether the member can be assisted in attending group latihans by removing whatever the obstacles are. Let's assume the helpers have done their duty in this respect and it turns out that the real obstacle is either that the person finds latihan on their own more beneficial anyway or the time and expense of travelling to latihan really makes it impractical to fit in group latihan with their other obligations. I think your point then might be that we shouldn't dismiss these members as having somehow lapsed or left, that we should maintain contact and support them. I would contend that in many groups that happens anyway, but I am a bit confused about what 'ways we can support people's continuing to do latihan after they leave Subud' would involve. If these people are quite happy to latihan on their own, in what way do they need our support? If we are talking about testing or even just chatting to a helper face to face, we can't expect to provide a flying helper service where helpers are travelling all over the place to give 1:1 support in people's own homes — it's probably all the helpers can do to get to latihan twice a week and give time for any testing on group latihan nights. Also, if the helpers aren't seeing the person at the group, how are they going to check whether they are still happy with the latihan? Telephoning the person might be regarded as an

intrusion, but on the other hand if the person's enthusiasm drops off, the helpers won't get to know about it.

Now we come to your point about people starting groups that aren't officially affiliated to Subud. In articles and editorials I have suggested that in future there might develop more than one organisation for supporting/promoting the latihan. It seems to me that when you have an organisation, it sets out guidelines or parameters within which it operates. These might be very lightweight, but they are still binding. If some people who belong to that organisation say, 'We don't agree with the way things are done here' — we are going off to form our own group or even a new organisation — the parent organisation no longer has any responsibility towards them either legally or morally. Say there were three organisations for the latihan. As we believe the latihan itself is an independent practise, I would like to think that anyone who was opened could turn up and latihan as a guest at either of the other two organisation they didn't belong to. Similarly, someone who had taken themselves away from any organisation could latihan as a guest. But that's very different from saying those organisations should continue to 'support' those who no longer wish to have any association with them.

Finally your 'I'm suggesting that we consider passing the latihan on to communities who want it without requiring that they join Subud, or maintain any ties to Subud.' It seems to me this could be a legal minefield. What would such 'passing on' involve? Would it be like a formal training course — say ten weeks, after which they were on their own? Could we be held responsible for the consequences of their mistakes — e.g. another person leaping out of a window through doing too much latihan? And I would myself also be extremely suspicious of any organisation trying to infiltrate their own practises into any organisation I belonged to. I would regard it as sinister. It's different if some people who belong to say a church also get opened and then decide they want to start a latihan practise within their religion — they could ask for advice informally — but there's no way an organisation would be advised to proactively interfere with another organisation's policies and workings.

HP:

By 'support' I am primarily thinking of an accepting and caring attitude, and only secondarily of any active involvement. What the latter would entail would, in part, have to do with whether the person still considers himself a Subud member, or if he formally decides to leave the organization altogether. The helpers would be more actively involved with the Subud member (would we have to change our definition?), checking in, and possibly going out of their way on occasion to meet with him, etc.

For the person who is no longer a member, they'd give him contact information and assure him of their availability to talk, if he should ever want that. Otherwise, they'd leave him alone — no checking in or checking up. If the person wants testing, latihan, or face-to-face contact at some future date, then the burden would fall on him to travel and make the arrangements. What the helpers —or maybe helpful members — did would depend on the person, the problem, and the practicality. There would be no requirement, rule, or obligation to do anything to help the former member, so one would have to rely on guidance, common-sense, and a caring heart to decide what was good and appropriate in each case.

As to new groups, I agree that the parent organization would no longer have any responsibility toward them. Again, I'm really advocating good will and being open to continued communication. If the relationships with the other groups stay friendly, then there's a better chance that members will be free to do latihan in any of the groups and not be barred because of some hostilities between them. Certainly one aspect of 'support' is to respect the other group's right to make their own decisions and not try to control or interfere with policies and workings. Thinking ahead, I suppose we

should expect that some people will be more accepting of this situation than others will, so I would hope those more positive people would take the lead in maintaining the relationships and the less enthusiastic would focus on just doing their latihans and not worrying about it.

I'm not certain why this would be more legally risky than our opening people in the first place. I'm surprised Subud hasn't been sued out of business so far. If people broke ties with Subud and formed their own groups, wouldn't we be less at risk legally, not more?

Your idea of a training course might be worth thinking about! It could replace the three-month applicant period.

SD:

I still think what you are describing is what good helpers do anyway. I am not saying what you are advocating is not important. It *is* important, but it is also complementary to the idea that for the people who do remain 'members' there should be no imposition of spiritual philosophy or implied acceptable and unacceptable patterns of thought. If an organisation could achieve these things then the latihan moving out to other groups and organisations would probably occur smoothly and naturally, but we haven't yet been able to demonstrate a parent organisation that truly believes in the latihan being one's own teacher.

HP:

I think we agree, for the most part, Sahlan.

As a final comment, I'd like to report that I'm already seeing a change in thinking at the grassroots level. While we still have strong group latihans in my local group, more members — some very long time members — have in the last couple of years decided to stop coming and do latihans alone or with one or two others instead.

Some still think of themselves as 'Subud', but others want nothing to do with it, usually complaining about the increasing religiosity of the active helpers with their rules and their Bapak said's. A few members and ex-members here have participated in opening people outside of Subud. More are saying that they have friends and family who might be interested in receiving the latihan, as long as they weren't required to join Subud or go through the applicant process. These things have always happened since the beginning of Subud, but perhaps it is becoming more widespread and more acceptable, particularly among the members and ex-helpers.

Of course, there is a growing divide between the people who are willing to do latihan and open others outside of Subud and the ones who feel that we must conduct ourselves according to their interpretation of what Bapak laid down. In my group the former usually speak in whispers and don't confront the active helpers. It's just easier that way. I don't know how long this tentative solution to getting along will last. I can feel a storm a-brewing!

Appendix

Recently I decided to sort through some old Subud literature to donate to my local group's library. There was a stack of Subud World journals in the bin, and one in particular caught my eye. I glanced at the table of contents and noticed a letter to Bapak from Ibrohim Clark (deceased) about the spread of the latihan. As I read it, I was excited to see that he had proposed some of the same things that Sahlan and I talked about in our Dialogue, and that

there was a reply from Bapak. What a wonderful synchronicity to stumble across it at this time so that we could include it in the discussion — one that began almost thirty years ago! — H.P.

Subud World
Volume 2, Number 3, 1982

A Programme for the Spread of Subud

Dear Bapak,

I wish to submit the enclosed ideas and plans for your consideration. As the founder of the Subud organisation and the person to bring the Latihan Kejiwaan to us all, I believe you must be the key person to either approve or disapprove of these ideas and plans.

As you know, I have been a faithful member of Subud for 23 years. I've literally done the latihan without interruption those years. I've also been a scientist given to analytical (hopefully, objective) thought or study. With this introduction I submit a plan to rapidly bring the spiritual exercise to many people that otherwise might never have the opportunity to receive it. This proposed programme would:

1. Eliminate the three month waiting period for new members.
2. Offer the exercise to any religious or devotional group that wished to experience and follow it.
3. Provide teams of three or more people to carry the explanation and contact to the group wishing the contact.
4. Provide this Subud team for three months to the group receiving the contact to ensure their understanding and diligence.
5. Provide any follow-up assistance IF it is requested from the group doing the latihan.
6. Accept any member of such a group into Subud after the three month initial period of experiencing the exercise in their Church or facility. Surely the souls of 'rich soil' will want to do the exercise regularly.
7. Make *no* conditions whatsoever about claiming the spiritual exercise for Subud. Once they have the latihan, it is theirs to experience and explain to the world the total non-sectarian nature of the spiritual vibration that constitutes the spiritual opening and spiritual exercise.

Although this may seem like a departure from existing Subud, to me it is only a broadening, a widening out, now that we have a fairly strong kernel of Subud in the world which *will maintain and renew* the purity of the latihan experience.

Further, in my analysis I see that it will break down the barriers between different religious and devotional groups and give them all a common denominator experience, i.e. the experience of the vibration of life itself.

Humbly submitted for Bapak's consideration.

With sincerity,
Ibrohim Clark

Bapak's Reply:

Dear Ibrohim,

I conveyed to Bapak your letter dated 23 December 1981 and Bapak asked me to reply as follows:

Bapak said that as time goes on whatever is required for the spread of Subud will arise by itself, both in terms of external circumstances and in terms of the understanding of Subud members themselves.

As to the three month waiting period, Bapak said that this is still required because this is our proof towards people who might criticise Subud that no pressure is ever brought to bear on anyone with a view to getting them to join Subud. Bapak said that this is most important because there certainly exist religious and political groups who oppose Subud and will try to bring it into disrepute.

Regarding your suggestion about bringing the latihan to other religious groups without requiring them to attach the Subud label to it, Bapak said that this is something that will happen by itself anyway, and has indeed already happened.

Bapak said that the latihan kejiwaan is not something that can be controlled by anyone, for it is a direct contact between man and God. What can be controlled by man is only the shariat (religious observance) and, to a lesser extent, the tarekat (religious mystical teaching), for at that point there are still priests or teachers who must be followed. But at the level of the hakekat, it is no longer possible for a human being to exert control over another.

For this reason we cannot force those who have been opened to come to group latihan if they prefer to do latihan by themselves at home.

Nevertheless, Bapak said it is essential that we continue with the work which Bapak has initiated, that of establishing enterprises which feed our social projects, because it is this that can bind Subud together. This work is certainly something Bapak will always go on with, for it is what he has received from Almighty God.

These were Bapak's replies and I hope I have been able to convey them clearly.

On behalf of Bapak,
Sharif Horthy

Editor's Note:

See also in this issue 'The Role of Subud' by Ragnar Lystad, another who has been independently thinking along very similar lines.

