

The Role of Subud

By Ragnar Lystad

At a recent Subud gathering, the question ‘What does Subud mean for you?’ was proposed as a theme for discussion and to encourage exchange of latihan experiences. Although all right for that purpose, the question implicitly assumes that Subud and the latihan are the same thing. This is something many – perhaps most – members take for granted without really thinking it over.

There is no sensible reason for the misunderstanding that Subud and the latihan are the same. The latihan is a spiritual phenomenon that has undoubtedly existed always, as Bapak repeatedly emphasized, but has not always been easily accessible by everyone. Subud, on the other hand, is a temporary, worldly organization, set up in order to facilitate group latihan and disperse the latihan throughout the world.

Those of us who have really come to appreciate the value of the latihan naturally feel a certain responsibility to make it available to others who might benefit from it. Paradoxically, we can but poorly fulfill that responsibility if we try to promote the Subud organization as such. Worldly progress may be a disadvantage. A wealthy organization which owns business enterprises while also professing to be a spiritual movement will inevitably meet resistance and antagonism among those who are involved with other religious or spiritual movements and also among those who despise religiosity.

In the past, Subud members have done their best to make Subud rich and influential (with scant success). We did that because Bapak encouraged us to. An organization in itself also naturally stimulates such activity. The reason lies perhaps in what psychologists label ‘identification’. Personal identification with an organization probably serves a useful purpose in the business world, but in the spiritual realm, where the goal should be unity with the whole of mankind, such attitudes are obviously out of place and must be abandoned. If we aspire towards fame and greatness for Subud, we try to create a separate movement that will be a new competitor in the religious arena, where every contestant claims a monopoly on God. But that will in the end generate more controversy in the world, not less.

So, if we should not promote the organization, how can we ‘promote’ the latihan, to make it generally available? Experience should have taught us that there is but one way: to do the latihan as sincerely as possible, and then be available and aware when an opportunity presents itself. For this we need an organization, but one adjusted to that one goal only and without any intention to boost itself. The purpose of this article is to create a rough outline of how such an organization might look and function.

Contrary to what has been a general assumption, the number of Subud members and the number of people doing the latihan are not, and should not be, the same. If we focus on the latihan and not on the growth of Subud, it follows that the latihan must be given freely, without demanding membership in Subud. Restricting the latihan to Subud members is in direct contradiction to the aim of making the latihan generally available. The latihan can in principle reach the whole of mankind, but Subud can never be more than a small worldly organization. Nor should it be, as that would cause antagonism, as previously mentioned.

Thus the latihan must be given without any conditions involved. We should not ask

people to become Subud members in order to experience the latihan. But transmitting the latihan must be done in a serious way. A well-functioning organization would ensure that experienced practitioners are available and can be contacted, to make an orderly introduction to the latihan possible. It must be confirmed that the newcomer has really accessed the latihan experience, which means that someone will have to follow the newcomer closely until this is clear. For this an established routine, backed by an organization, will be valuable and probably essential.

Membership, on the other hand, should only be offered as an option. The decision can wait; it does not have to be made immediately. In the meantime, the newcomer should be allowed, even encouraged, to do latihan in the Subud group. This should also apply if he or she rejects the invitation to become a member. Thus the group latihan would also have to be open to people who have not chosen formal membership, who might be required to pay some admission fee instead, if deemed necessary.

Membership would still have a meaning, but it would imply something other than the 'right' to experience the latihan. Its meaning should be the acceptance of a responsibility to preserve the latihan in its genuine form and thus contribute to the existence of a source for the latihan in the world. This, then, would be the purpose of the organization and its *raison d'être*.

In the group latihans no clear distinction between members and non-members need be made. The significance of voluntary membership will be: for the non-members, the freedom to do the latihan without having to be associated with a particular organization, and, for the members, the awareness that they have taken on a joint responsibility for the future of the latihan.

This scenario recognizes the importance of the group latihan. I have the opinion, formed over many years, that the latihan is best kept alive and flourishing if practised regularly in a group, so that people can support each other in the spiritual experience. Personal contacts and friendships, moreover, are very helpful for maintaining the staying power that is indeed necessary. The group is therefore essential.

I am presenting here a scenario where many people can do the latihan – within Subud and equally well in contexts outside Subud – while a smaller number of people would constitute a kind of 'core', who would strive to tend the spirit of the latihan in the best way. I think this is a possible, even likely, outcome and a plausible future, but it will have consequences that we now usually do not consider. It might, for example, happen that newcomers decline membership but choose instead to join together to do latihan in other groups not under the name of Subud. That would be all right, and not only all right, it should actually be our real and ultimate aim. Envisage, for example, that churches or mosques could be places where the congregation do latihan together, of course not calling it 'latihan', but essentially doing the same thing.

Will not this lead to chaos? If the latihan survives into the future, it may take a variety of manifestations, adjusting to differing needs and cultures. That is not the same as chaos, but it could mean that the latihan goes beyond our control, and that is as it should be, because it cannot be controlled, and if we try, we block its potential range and extent. In the end we cannot even presume that the word 'latihan' will survive, and this does not matter either. Changing the label does not imply change of content.

It means that other groups could emerge that might actually be better at

transmitting the latihan to people who want it. It might happen that an organization with a very different name could in the future be the best source for the latihan, while Subud degenerates into a mechanical ritual. We may actually expect this to happen sometime, because history has shown that scarcely any movement has been able to keep its original impulse alive for ever. In fact, we can already see such tendencies in Subud. If the spiritual content of the latihan is kept alive and flourishing, this will be no tragedy. Neither the name nor the history has any real significance. What is important is that some organization will be able to pass on the latihan in its genuine form.

So the value of the Subud organization would also be recognized. Although we presume that the latihan will never die out, we cannot take for granted that easy access to it will last forever, or that it will be given to us again if we lose it. As many have observed, the latihan can easily degenerate into a lifeless ritual. We have to try to ensure that the spirit of the latihan is kept pure and authentic, and available to as many as have a need for it. An organization specially dedicated to it is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for keeping it alive. For the time being Subud is, as far as we know, the best and maybe only source for the latihan, and from that stems a responsibility that cannot be casually dismissed. The present organization could be a steward of the latihan, when its members have accepted the responsibility to transmit it to all who have a desire for such an experience. That is Subud's main role and it could be a very important one indeed.

Strangely enough, that would for many – maybe most – imply a rather different view of the organization, and indeed a significant change of direction and attitudes.