

The Imprisonment of the Latihan

By Ragnar Lystad

That our spiritual exercise, called the 'latihan', can and does exist outside Subud is something all Subud members know. The force that we experience in the latihan has, according to Bapak, always existed and is everywhere. It is, moreover, easy to verify that people can leave Subud and still go on doing the latihan. Obviously the latihan is not the same as Subud and exists apart from Subud.

The distinction, although evident and indisputable, has not been taken much notice of. Without saying it directly, without really considering the matter, we assume that to do the latihan is equivalent to being a Subud member. The Subud organization has monopolized this particular exercise, making it the 'Subud latihan'. This term serves to misinform the public and confuse ourselves as well.

Mhd. Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo (Bapak) established the Subud organization in order to have a worldly vehicle for the practice and spread of the latihan. But the latihan itself cannot be confined to an organization. Neither can the ability to pass on the latihan be limited to members of a special organization. It seems that once this ability has been firmly established, it can be transmitted unconditionally — not only the ability to do the latihan, but also the ability to transmit the same ability to others, and so on. Although we may have acquired it in Subud, we do not have to stay in Subud in order to keep and practice it.

For Subud as an organization, the latihan is its reason for existence. But does the latihan really need an organization like Subud for its dissemination throughout the world?

From a historical perspective, we may have to answer this question in the affirmative. As a new experience — new at least in its method of dissemination, if not new to humanity — the latihan was facilitated by the organizational framework. We relied on someone with experience to visit and help us through the bewildering early stages, e.g. with recommendations about how to arrange the latihan and how often, as well as some basic advice about what to expect, testing and so on. And then we had to acquire and finance latihan facilities and lay down procedures for further transmission of the latihan. In this way, Subud developed into a close community or brotherhood that without doubt had great value for a large number of the first practitioners of the latihan (including myself).

But now we should be thinking not of the past, but the future. It seems to me unlikely that Subud in its present form has the potential to make the latihan attractive to humankind. A main reason is just that Subud is a brotherhood.

A feeling of brotherhood is normally regarded as an admirable and attractive quality. Can there be anything undesirable about brotherhood? Is not the feeling of being brothers and sisters one of the most pure and lofty that human beings can have? It is not always so, and the reason is that if some are our brothers, others will necessarily not be. Non-Subud people will then be on the other side — they cannot be our brothers. A feeling of having something very essential in common may have the effect of setting us apart from everybody else — yet another instance of the perennial human habit of making a division between 'them' and 'us'. This is the hallmark of a sect. A brotherhood is just a more acceptable name for a sect or cult. A brotherhood is sectarian because it is separative and makes a distinction between them and us.

If we are to regard all humankind as our brothers and sisters, we cannot reserve our brotherly feelings for a special group. Our sectarianism constitutes an impediment to the

spread of the latihan, because not everybody wants to be a sect member and not everybody should be. Many have an instinctive, often justified, aversion to sects or cults. There seems to be a great spiritual yearning in the world, but Subud cannot satisfy it.

A particularly disastrous aspect of this is the idea of 'Subud enterprises' – i.e. enterprises intended to be associated with Subud. The idea was that Subud enterprises would make the name 'Subud' known and respected all over the world, but this was not at all a good idea, as experience has shown. Almost all the endeavours we have embarked on have failed, and humanitarian projects too have scarcely got off the ground. Many reasons for this have been offered, but the real one is, I think, that such sectarian endeavours are simply not right, and never have been. The real challenge and duty is to work in the world, with the help of the universal latihan but together with people who may not be Subud members. In that way we bring the latihan into the world — by working together with all kinds of people and fully partaking in all the usual activities found in a society.

We have made Subud into a sect, and we have made this sect the 'owner' of the latihan. This is to put the organization first, while the latihan is given second place. That way the roles are reversed. The latihan has to come first, while Subud should be regarded as a less important servant or vehicle, to be freely disposed of if no longer needed. The latihan has to be accessible to everybody, and offered without restrictions, free of all religious considerations or teachings, which means that it cannot be given only to those willing to join Subud.

Many other kinds of spiritual or psychical exercises are not 'owned' by a specific organization, and neither should the latihan be. If membership is not a condition of receiving the latihan, it will be much easier to tell others about it, as we would not have to admit to being members of a sect, which would be regarded as evidence that we worship some exotic guru and adhere to some obscure teaching. And we will not have to implicitly put up a wall between ourselves and others by regarding them as non-initiates.

If the latihan is, as Bapak maintained, a gift to mankind, then the Subud organization that he established has functioned as a steward of this gift. Keeping it within the borders of a specific organization, effectively fencing it in, can perhaps be defended as a provisional measure but not as the right way to carry out such stewardship for all time. In fact it could seem as if we are trying to utilize the latihan for the essentially egoistic aims of our special group. And this group can never, as is now realized by most members, encompass more than a minuscule portion of mankind. We have imprisoned the latihan.

If the latihan is to be made available to all mankind, it cannot be monopolized by one organization; it must be regarded as a method that can be practised within every organization that has a religious or spiritual purpose. Then other organizations may arise that practise their own variants of the latihan. It is even possible to imagine — although maybe too much to hope for — that the latihan could be accepted as part of the general worship of God in all religions. Certainly it is the same God that the devotees turn to in all the main religions, but how to achieve a general acceptance and understanding of that? The way, it seems to me, is to enable the devotees to have a deeper inner experience, and thus lessen their attachment to words that are, however true they may be, only words. This would also conform to Bapak's ideal — that the latihan should be performed in a religious context. But then the latihan has to come to the religions, not vice versa.

For this to happen, a marked reorientation of the whole Subud movement is necessary, perhaps making the organization superfluous, especially in the long run — or maybe not. As long as it has a function in spreading and supporting the latihan all over the world, the organization has a value. It seems to me that this function will likely be temporary, although one cannot make predictions. Things could develop in many different ways. We may see a

situation where some people stick together under the Subud flag, trying to keep a special tradition going. Or Subud may dissolve completely. This, I think, is not up to God; it is up to ourselves. The most important thing is that our primary aim will not be to keep the Subud group going or to extend the membership, but to be instrumental in disseminating the latihan all over the world.

To what degree should we actively promote the latihan in other conditions or settings? I have no fixed opinion on this; maybe it will depend on individual members. The first thing, the starting point, will be to give up our copyright, which we do not really possess in any case. If we think we do, we are seriously mistaken. Bapak himself compared the latihan to the Holy Spirit given to the first Christians. Certainly it is not ours. Such an understanding will make space for a creativity that is intrinsically unpredictable, and also for receiving guidance. Maybe the reason that we cannot get more members is just this: there is no guidance to be received in the direction we are heading.

But if Subud renounces its monopoly on the latihan — which cannot be sustained in any case — what will happen in the future? What forms will the practice of the latihan take? Such concerns stem from a belief that we have a responsibility to keep the latihan within its present framework. I dispute this responsibility, which I think is misplaced. We should not try to stop the latihan from expressing itself in various ways according to the needs of the time and place. We can assist its dissemination, but not control it.

It would probably be fine if the body of Subud experience accumulated during more than fifty years within a sheltered environment, as in a laboratory, does not get lost but can be brought to the attention of future practitioners. Maybe some of Bapak's explanations will also survive and be taken seriously in the future. But the development has to take its own course, according to humankind's ability and willingness to receive it. First, however, they must be given the chance.

These are not such radical suggestions. Bapak himself, in his love story 'Sinar Pribadi' describes a situation where some people do the latihan, but there is no mention of an organization or a brotherhood. Neither do we find it in his main work, the Javanese poem 'Susila Budhi Dharma'. Obviously the organization was not the main thing, even for Bapak. To let the latihan out of its Subud prison could be a natural and maybe predictable development, and maybe it will come about by itself. But I am not so sure. I have a feeling that the organization is now actively working against such an eventuality — which might, however, be its true purpose. We should take a step back and consider where our real responsibilities lie.