

How I Latihan

Michael Irwin

Meister Eckhart: *“God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by the process of subtraction.”*

Pewarta Vol. V, No. 6. April, 1968: *It is better to speak only of that which is in accordance with your own experience up to now; namely, the movement of life which you have received and which we call the latihan kedjiwaan.*

Curious, isn't it? Pak Subuh, who undoubtedly knew more about the latihan than the rest of us, said, many times, that we who do the latihan should speak only about our own experience of “the movement of life”: the latihan. Following this suggestion, reports abound, fanciful or real, about the effects of the exercise on the practitioners' lives but no one, to my knowledge, reports on what they actually do when practising it. This essay is an attempt to tell you, in the first person, what I do in the latihan with a minimum of reference to its results. I only know my own experience but I believe there are as many possible different personal descriptions of the latihan as there are practitioners. I see no reason for anyone to agree or disagree with what I do. Instead, I hope that readers will reply with descriptions of their own.

Because the latihan is an internal, private activity rather than a shared one, I believe I need to furnish you, the reader, with a vocabulary unique to this essay but drawn from our common experiences. When I later describe what goes on during my latihan, I can be more precise than I would be if I struggled to define words then.

I will use only English words that have widespread meanings to describe what I do while in latihan. As an exception I will continue to refer to the spiritual exercise of Subud as 'latihan' because Subud practitioners universally understand it, and because there is no simple, unambiguous English substitute. I will not use such words as *'nafsu'* or *'jiwa'* and the like because they are labels which refer to a Javanese world view and only make sense if you believe in the truth of that worldview. Where I live, scientists, psychologists and people on the street believe that they know what is meant by words like: thought, mind, visualization, imagination, emotion and feeling. That belief does not mean that they can replicate the experience of others but they can make sense of it imaginatively.

By 'mind' I include all those activities that seem to occur within my skull especially when my eyes are closed. Those activities include reasoning, daydreaming, visualizing, remembering and invoking imaginatively replications of the senses such as pictures and sounds. I am sure you could add to the list. I will use the word 'thought' to refer to purposeful mental activities, i.e. ideas, reasoning, visual constructs, etc. intended to explore something rather than just participate in it. By 'emotions' I refer to those experiences of love, hate, fear and their derivatives such as awe, jealousy, envy, lust and so forth. For me, the location of emotions is ambiguous though related to the body. By 'drives' I refer to those imperative, usually unconscious, compulsions: social, practical, emotional, hormonal, relief of discomfort, strategic, moral, etc., that underlie our actions. Thoughts are employed by drives to plan for, execute and review goals requiring action in life. Success, obstruction and failure in the attainment of goals produces emotions: pleasure, anger and disappointment respectively. So emotions and mental activity result from drives,

as does the 'will'.

Emotions strongly infuse the mind with pressures that may add a 'charge' to, for instance, thoughts or memories. This charge may demand my attention to a thought or a picture, making it difficult to dismiss. Even my ever-present body, normally ignored, may demand attention by being uncomfortable or by moving. The word 'attention' is central. Something has to 'pay attention' if attention is to have a meaning. That 'something' changes depending on the focus of the attention. The body may pay attention unconsciously when it automatically moves to avoid being hit by a rapidly moving object. Attention may be paid by an ill defined 'I' while threading a needle where the focus seems to be outside the skull. I will use 'ego' to describe the source of attention when the focus seems to be within the skull. So, the ego, in this essay, is the point of attentiveness that can watch the operations of the mind or the emotions. The 'I' that observes the ego, though, feels as though it is inside a small person, me, inside my skull. This 'small person' is known as an 'homunculus'.^[1]

So, if I experience a memory I may then become aware that my ego is watching the memory, that is, I become aware that I am remembering. At that moment I could also become aware of the existence of my ego via the attention of my homunculus, with which I identify but which I cannot watch; that is, I become aware of paying attention to the memory. Of course it is possible to postulate a never-ending world of watchers watching watchers. However, I have never experienced watching the homunculus and I don't wish to describe something I haven't experienced. What does matter to me is making sure the meaning of these words as they are used in this essay is clear. Thus, I can label which watcher is me at any given moment by using these specific words. Please note that I am not saying that any of these watchers is the real me. I don't know which 'I' is the real me or whether the real me is something or somewhere else. .

Let me make another distinction, that between the 'active' and the 'contemplative' state, by using the vocabulary of a book called the *Cloud of Unknowing*.^[2] By 'active state' I mean the state of paying attention during the usual daily activities of living. There are three active states: participatory, willful and daydreaming. During most active states I do not observe the activities I am doing with any objectivity. I just participate in them—hence 'participatory'. However, I—and you, I believe—can comment to myself on my activities and make judgements about them. In other words, I appear to have a 'will' to direct my waking activities —hence a 'willful' state. In the employ of that 'will' is 'reason' and 'wish'. Reason appears to be related to mind and wish to emotions. These states are not to be confused with the state in which an activity slips from attention into a routine during which I daydream. During those moments of drift, I have no consciousness of participation or of will. My attention has been captured by the memory or the daydream.

In these three active states I don't watch my ego watching what I am doing or thinking. My attention is either captured through participation in an activity, by a need to make a decision with my will or by daydreaming. Gurdjieff would, I believe, describe these states as being machine-like because my actions are each a vector ^[3] of the many drives, each originating in some discomfort. Thus my will is not 'free' but determined by those drives. Each vector is a different 'I'. In the active state I fool myself into thinking that my actions are from a single 'me' and tell myself that they are the manifestations of my will when I'm really just along for the ride switching from identity to identity as the situation changes.

The contemplative state, unlike the active state, is entered through activation of the watchers in the skull: the homunculus paying attention to the ego paying attention to the mind. Normally, because little can be done for long in the active life while these contemplative observations take our full attention, the two states are incompatible. However, the capacity momentarily to be contemplative can exist during an active state when doing a habitual activity such as sweeping floors.

I hope the word definitions and relationships reviewed above are sufficient to make clear what follows while I try to describe what happens in my latihan.

When I first started doing the latihan in 1962, I was conscious of several ideas pertaining to it. They are recognizable to all Subud members: submission, patience, trust and, in later decades, courage; that thinking or emotions will prevent submission and therefore the latihan; that being regular in doing the latihan is good; that the will should be suspended in latihan; and lately, that one should pay attention during the latihan. Other ideas such as that the latihan was prayer or worship and that I would be communicating in the latihan with an undefined God left me cold.

After I was opened I immediately moved. My latihan were very noisy and active. They were muscular. Both movement and vocalization are created by the activity of muscles. So while, in the beginning, I could let go and move, inside my skull my mind was busy. The first thing I had to satisfy myself about was: "Was doing the latihan dangerous?" That question faded as time passed and nothing beyond what I could handle in the way of emotional disturbances occurred. The second thing was to determine if my will was involved. I tried moving my body in latihan because I wanted to, not because it just moved by itself. I was soon able to tell the difference between willed and non-willed movement. Furthermore, I discovered that when I willed my movements, something else in the world of my attention changed and I went into a different state from the one I was experiencing in the rest of my latihan. I began to make the distinction between the active and contemplative state. After a few months, then, I believed that the latihan was not dangerous and that there was a difference between the active and contemplative states. So you could say that I trusted the latihan. I had no trouble with believing that regular attendance was necessary. The latihan was, after all, an exercise. That left submission, patience and courage.

The question of thoughts interfering with the latihan began to take centre stage. If you are told not to think of an elephant what else can you think of? Just deciding not to think didn't work. Submission was apparently the path to not thinking. But what did submission mean? I did (and do) believe in a creative power in the universe and I did (and do) have a sense of having been created. However, I had no sense of a place or direction to where I could submit. I translated, with some help, the idea of submission into the idea of 'letting go', but letting go of what? Thoughts, of course! From that realization followed a life-long struggle.

How to let go of mental activity became the focus of my latihan. At first, I tried letting go of thoughts in a way similar to the way I earlier released my body to do what it wanted. If you depress the clutch in a moving car with a manual transmission on a flat road, the car will continue moving by coasting. I tried de-clutching my thoughts. The metaphor worked in that my thoughts coasted in a life of their own while I paid less and less attention to them.

This approach was profitable. An increased degree of calmness emerged. There was, however, a problem. The process only worked for a very, very short time.

Before I knew it I was daydreaming, thinking out a problem, worrying about an outcome and so on, in other words no longer contemplating. That is when I became aware of the fact that I could not sustain ignoring the mind. I tried letting go and focussing on greater submission even if I didn't know what more to let go of. This took years. The length of time I could maintain the state of letting go did increase though not by much, maybe from two seconds to ten. The distractions of my mind hovered around and continually won. Remembering to let go could not be sustained. All that time I felt good after latihan and seemed to understand my life better. Such positive feedback meant that coming to latihan, especially regularly, invited return because of its inherent reward. The problem of making the mind vanish, however, still remained.

I had taken a course of vision training before being opened with a wonderful teacher who taught me a lot about seeing and relaxing using mental exercises. The preparation for these exercises involved focussing my thoughts on a singular scene: using my imagination I would systematically cover all the surfaces of a room, remembered or invented, with black velvet. If I stuck with the mental discipline I could create a visualized space that was entirely black and therefore without any discernible content because all the edges would disappear in blackness: no furniture, no lamps, no floor, no knick-knacks, nothing visible. I remained focussed only on the details of the very black blackness but on nothing else. If my attention wandered, which it did repeatedly, I daydreamed without the consciousness of doing so until I became aware that I had lost the discipline to maintain the black world within. I then tried again and again in a repeating cycle. The effect was very relaxing.

I decided to apply the vision-training discipline of the black world to controlling thoughts in the latihan. The difference between the eye training and the latihan was that once I had established the relaxed blackness, I had to let go of even that. Well, of course, with each try the next thing I knew I was daydreaming or speculating on some active life problem. So began a long process of years leading up to the present day. The length of time I daydreamed was often very long, sometimes most of the latihan. Over time I became aware at shorter intervals that I had been trapped by a distraction. The length of the cycle, therefore, shortened. (I should mention that each latihan begins now as though I had never done one before and progresses through most of the stages discussed here.) I repeated the routine using the black world with each latihan but the results over time changed and were measurable. The 'black' state became a 'blank' or 'void' state, a state of little or no mental activity. My capacity to retain that void state for more than a second or two started to increase—with setbacks. For a short time, at least, while easily disturbed, the void state could achieve its own stability, i.e. without having to be maintained. I can now sometimes stay in that void state for many seconds, perhaps minutes, and I remember that I have been distracted more quickly. Because the void state is no longer fleeting I have time to submit to it by trying to let go of the ego observer. That process of submission or letting go is like leaning into the void and trying to sink into it. Because I was not now paying as much attention to the maintenance of the void state, I could try to participate in it in the same way that I would participate in daydreaming, that is without paying attention to what I was doing. So the transformation I hoped for was from being unconscious of participating in a daydream to becoming unconscious of participating in a void state, that is, in a non-thinking, very empty state.

So, over time, being aware of my ego observing became easier and easier for me. The ability to let that attention-to-the-void-state sink into submission without slipping into daydreaming, however, has not been available to me so far. I'm still working on it. The power of the mind to divert never goes away.

Submission or 'letting go' is often described as 'will-lessness'. The question of the will in latihan is, I believe, subtle. I don't try to suppress my active life 'will' but rather try to not to pay attention to the sources of that will—as discussed before: the unconscious drives. My 'will' is excluded by the void state because the manifestations of the drives—thoughts and emotions—are quiet. However, you may argue that I'm using my will to maintain the void state discipline. That may be correct. If that is true, for me the 'will' employed to maintain discipline seems located in a different place from the will to do things in the active life. Perhaps the forces directing contemplative attention are different. Perhaps I'm fooling myself. I don't know.

For a while I slept through most of my latihans. I don't know whether I was sleep-deprived at the time or not. I don't think I was though it may have been a factor. I now believe that letting go to sleeping is just another distraction in the latihan to divert me from paying attention. Sleeping substitutes a dream state for staying awake, paying attention and trying to let go. Sleeping is much less work. I don't allow sleeping in my latihan now.

A more significant obstacle to letting go completely is a particular kind of fear. The source seems to be a fear of losing control, even of being embarrassed by my possible behaviour. Permission to allow anything in latihan doesn't help. This fear is so absolute that it feels as though it is about losing identity. It may be the fear one would expect in the common mystical metaphor of the drop disappearing into the ocean. I really would like to know the trick of allowing the merging to happen but the fear always wins. So is this a failure of trust? Is this the point where courage makes the difference? Is this the need for courage that Pak Subuh speaks of? I don't know.

As a brief digression from examining the inner workings of my latihans, let me say how important external discipline is to the process. Pak Subuh's suggestion that two latihans a week are a necessary minimum and that a third is useful has worked well for me. One latihan a week results in a period of recurring inner unease between latihans until the next latihan removes it. Two are like treading water, staying afloat with small but successful void states. The third latihan makes possible a noticeable improvement in the retention of my void states. More does nothing negative but does not make accessing the desired state easier. At one time doing more than three a week created a state of unease between latihans but that no longer happens. Since becoming isolated from a group, I have moved into a pattern employing a forty-minute latihan with a very short initial quiet period. The first ten minutes of the latihan is usually a warm-up or preparation in any case.

I think it is important to say that discipline also extends into the latihan itself. The process described above is a cycle requiring me constantly to retry: letting go followed by paying attention to work further on blackness-blankness-void, to slipping unconsciously into daydreaming or to mentally working on some active life problem, to remembering again that I have forgotten that I am in latihan and should try again. The need to recognize attention failure and to restore it without regretting the failure is a struggle like constantly keeping a plate spinning on a pole. It does become easier over time as in any exercise. The strongest threat for me is the intrusion of mental commentary about what I'm trying to do. This commentary is clever. It masquerades as a part of the process because it is an assessment of the process. But, in fact, it is just thinking. Remembering that it is thinking in order to stop it is most difficult.

And finally in this digression, changes of meaning have occurred to a couple of words. Just as the meaning of submission has shifted for me into 'letting go', a still broader meaning of both 'submission' and 'letting go' has merged into 'acceptance', a meaning made possible, I believe, by the latihan (or by age). So too, the word 'patience', which, for me, originally meant not being 'impatient', has been replaced for me by 'perseverance' a reference to dogged discipline. So I persevered.

Now I would like to resume my description by examining another aspect of the latihan, an aspect that also required the need for perseverance. After about eighteen years of latihan I began to experience stagnation. I was beginning to get the void state a bit under control but nothing more happened. I felt stuck and was becoming bored. I then had an experience that fitted the description of a very short mystical experience as defined by students of mysticism. It saved my latihan.

Flowing from that experience, in a flood of fresh knowledge extending over several days, I became aware of the fact that I was not letting go of everything in latihan. I thought I had been letting go quite well and I felt quite self-congratulatory about it in spite of my boredom. However, into my latihan had crept a confusion that interfered with the clarity of the process described before about finding and sustaining a void state. I began to feel disoriented by this confusion. I was not confused within my mind, which was being regularly quietened by the void state. The confusion was present whether I was daydreaming, in a void state or any other state. It was all pervasive, just 'there'. Its intensity varied. I couldn't continue to focus on my ego maintaining attention. As always happens in latihan, I had the usual struggle to let go, to achieve blankness, then to let that go and enter into and maintain a void and then to participate in that void. But accompanying this process from shortly after the start of the latihan through most of its length was this new disorientation. I was treating the confusion as a new enemy, a new attempt by some part of me to divert me away from the receiving state which I associated with a void. Now, suddenly, while doing my daily routines as a farmer, that is, not in latihan, it became clear to me that rather than fight this state I should allow it, and accept it as well. The result was a remarkable and total renaissance of my latihan, a renewal often still with me to the present day.

I came to welcome the appearance of that confusion and I learned to sink into it as though into a soft bed. I remembered that in the *Cloud of Unknowing* [4] the title referred to a state of contemplation much welcomed by the author. Rather than a cloud I think of the state as that of being in a fog. But, as described in the *Cloud*, the foggy state is not part of the mind. It actually supports a continuation of the void with a positive experience that is more accessible than the negative state of nothingness. For me now, entering into this fog is where I wanted to be. The fog seems to have a location inside and around my head. Experiences have come with the fog. For instance, I have felt as though I have risen above it to a sort of crystalline, clear, still world. That experience did not continue to recur. I have also become intermittently aware of the 'Cloud of Forgetting', also referred to in the *Cloud*, as being below the head and into which items from the mind such as ideas and memories can be tossed.

These experiences have no importance in themselves. Obviously they matter to me but they are of no necessary importance to anyone else. What does matter is something I have not mentioned before. None of my efforts, and you can see that I have made long-term efforts, were of any use without help. Simply practising could have extended the time I could maintain my attention on a void state. But something helped me in revealing that I was failing to let go to the fog, an attitude that I only

became aware of spontaneously. Something in me pushed it under my nose. I don't think that information came into my mind simply because I continued to do the latihan in spite of its staleness. I do think that just doing latihan and not making an effort would have soon resulted in my leaving it as the juices dried up. You can call that something that helped 'God' if you wish. I prefer to think of it as a knowing sub-conscious part of me that might be of divine origin or not. What it is doesn't matter, but I am grateful to it.

I will not go into further detail by examining small events that occur in the latihan as they do in life. The above description is a scaffold for a number of repeating experiences ranging from a complete inability to do anything by way of discipline to a multitude of diversions in which my mind did, in fact, provide unexpected perceptions about, and solutions to, stuff I was dealing with in my life. You can interpret those events as being guidance if you wish, though usually, for me, they were not dissimilar to active life 'Aha!' moments.

What has all this recitation meant? I promised that I would only write about what I did in the latihan. Many things have happened in my life that I would like to ascribe to the latihan. However, for me to ascribe such moments to the latihan would be speculation. I have no proof, no, not even for myself that those things came from the latihan. They just seem to have done so. Remember, like you, I have no parallel life lacking the latihan: a control existence against which I could compare, as in an experiment, what is in my present life but missing in that other life.

A couple of insights do seem to me to relate to the recitation above. A quote from Melinda Wallis on the CongressNews listserver seems worth looking at. She wrote: "Well, what is the benefit of doing the Latihan for decades?...The benefit is that the people gradually become more and more their own self. Our individuality is made manifest. I also don't feel an empty void inside myself...."

That quote rings true to me. The discipline of paying attention in the latihan when letting go of mental distractions creates a familiarity with an internal, personal world that is increasingly available during my active life. That familiarity does seem to provide a solid sense of self-identity that replaces, when needed, the confusing variety of 'I's that Gurdjieff refers to. Do I definitely know what I am? No, but the place seems clearer. I know where I am.

Knowing where I am seems to have had a philosophical result though the link is hard to demonstrate. I no longer think that the mystery of why good or bad things happen to people can be cracked. So I have had to give up, with some pain, ideas such as karma that provided comfortable explanations for good and bad events. I have developed a greater and greater sense of doubt about everything that others have told me. I no longer think that the universe is just or that it is purposeful. I no longer think that I can make decisions that 'matter'. Don't get me wrong, I still play the worldview speculation game and behave as though what I do is significant—why else would I write this?—but I hope that I won't be captured, through that playing, by some attractive set of beliefs which would then limit me with rules and explanations. I still enjoy living an active life for its own sake and pretend that my being active matters. However, if I'm probed about its significance, I can't find it. Perhaps knowing where I am has given me the confidence needed to doubt.

Knowing where I am seems also to give me confidence about what life throws at us. The complexity of the causes of events is often beyond satisfactory analysis. As a result of my limited capacity to understand causes I have the feeling that events

appear to be random. Thus, without a philosophical framework available to explain events, I am left to greet them with pleasure or rage or, alternatively, with equanimity, neither exulting in the highs or being trodden on by the lows. I prefer the equanimity option but I don't think I can decide to choose it. I can only be grateful for it. It manifests only as a luxurious reflection of my lucky state. In sum, it seems the experience of knowing where my identity resides in latihan helps with accessing equanimity in my active life. Objectively I don't see my life as being any more smooth than before but my responses to its vagaries seem less extreme. That is the meaning, I believe, of Pak Subuh's often expressed anticipation that the progress of the latihan, enterprises or meetings would "go smoothly." [5] I find it interesting that I perceive the same messy world of events to be more and more smooth. Not all old men do.

Notes:

1. The Random House College Dictionary: a diminutive human; midget.
2. The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works, Anonymous, translated by Clifton Wolters, published by Penguin ISBN 0-14-044385-1
3. The Random House College Dictionary: Math—a quantity possessing both magnitude and direction, represented by an arrow the direction of which indicates the direction of a quantity and the length of which is proportional to the magnitude. The author's analogy is that the vector of a person's behaviour is a product of the goal and intensity (direction and magnitude) of an active life drive which results in an action to satisfy the goal of that drive in proportion to the drive's strength. For example: hunger aims a person in the direction of food. The hungrier the person, the more intense is the behaviour to obtain food. Multiple, simultaneous drives produce a blending of vectors. Some vectors may be mutually cancelling, resulting in paralysis.
4. See 2 above.
5. A sample: 79 CDK 13: "The material or satanic force does indeed become a temptation for people who are unable to regulate it. If they can regulate it, like an architect or engineer who designs and completes a beautiful great building, these temptations will still be there but they will not influence them, and so the work can go smoothly and these people can achieve the aims for which they hope."