

# Buddhism and Subud

By Stefan Freedman

What did the Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor? “Make me one with everything.”

There are around 350 million Buddhists worldwide (Wikipedia).

Although there are sects who pray to the Buddha, more usually a Buddhist tries to follow his enlightened example. Many Buddhists feel no inclination at all to “pray” or to “worship God”. In fact hearing about the latihan in terms such as “worship of God” will suggest a gulf between their religious experience and Subud. There is no belief in a Creator God in Buddhism, so talk of God usually leaves them cold.

For many Buddhists, their biggest challenge approaching Subud is that the heart of their religious practice is not prayer but meditation.

This is what Subud U.K.’s website says about Subud and religion: “Following the latihan can add a deeply meaningful and experiential dimension to existing religious and spiritual practice.”

This summarises Bapak’s inclusive vision, and I like the way it is worded. But there does seem to be a conflict between this message and Bapak’s advice not to combine meditation with the latihan. This sends out a mixed message, not only to Buddhists, but also to the growing number of spiritually inclined non-Buddhists who are now practising meditation for reasons ranging from stress release to deepening their spiritual life. Are we dismissing or negating a core Buddhist religious practice?

Bapak seems to use the term meditation in a very specific and restricted sense, as a focussing of the mind. He may have been concerned to draw a clear line between the latihan and certain meditation traditions found in Indonesia. But concentration is only one of many forms of meditation. Other forms don’t involve focussing, but aim at “de-focussing”, relaxing and broadening awareness.

In my experience, many Subud people seem to have a very generalised and incomplete picture of what meditation really consists of. Wikipedia says of Buddhist meditation that there are more than fifty distinct kinds. For example, of eight well-known forms, one is described as “walking meditation” and another as “just sitting”.

One of my friends, a Subud member with a Jewish/Hindu background, does five- to ten-minute meditations periodically during the day. She says that her preferred form of meditation is to sit and relax, allow the breathing to naturally slow down, allow thoughts to arise if they do, without concentrating or focusing on anything. Although she is “doing nothing”, the peacefulness feels very full of content, like a blessing. This seems very much how I experience the quiet periods before latihan, and it’s what I do sometimes if I find myself getting wound up or needing to feel the latihan during the day: I quieten myself. How is my friend’s practice different?

This friend is disappointed at the ignorance she finds in Subud about meditation. If she describes having several short “quiets” during the day, people approve and are impressed, but if she talks of having brief meditations, people look concerned or disapproving! Yet the difference seems only to be a question of wording.

So I am inviting you to be aware that there exist many forms of meditation, some of which are very like the quiet times we cherish before and after latihan. Many people

today who share our interest in spiritual development, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, treasure meditation highly. Imagine how it would feel to you or me if someone said, “You are accepted into this course but you’ll have to stop doing the latihan!”

Ironically, when I first tell people about Subud, hearing the name “Subud”, some guess that it may be connected with Buddhism. And indeed, a Buddhist may recognise the elements of the acronym “Subud”. The same or similar Sanskrit words in a Buddhist context have meanings quite close to the ones Bapak gave.

*susila*—of good character, ethical

*bodhi*—the Buddhist term for awakening/enlightenment

*Dharma*—the true nature of things

These words taken together could suggest to a Buddhist that Subud is about an awakening to the true nature of things, leading to an improvement in character and an ethical way of living.

To a Buddhist, Subud’s non-reliance on doctrine could be seen as an attraction because “the Buddha regarded his own teachings as a raft to cross the river and not as an absolute truth” (Thich Nhat Hanh in his book, *Interbeing*). A Buddhist might also feel very drawn to the latihan as a potential source of direct experience of that which—being beyond words and images—Buddhists sometimes call “suchness”.

I find in Subud some particular resonances with Zen Buddhism. “Zen teaches nothing; it merely enables us to wake up and become aware” (D. T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, London, 1960). And this awareness, or enlightenment, has been described in Zen as the discovery of the “original face before you were born”. In terms of the action of latihan this could perhaps be comparable to the uncovering of our true inner nature.

There is a Bapak quote about the latihan which is very apt here: “Within our being this Power enables us to get to know and to feel our own true nature and personality. And that is why the experience you have in the *latihan kejiwaan*, the experience of a power within yourself, is like a life within your life, and deeper than our everyday life. It is this which you must worship. It is this which you must magnify. It is this which must be your God. Because there is nothing else from whom you can learn.” 81 YVR  
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My son, Philip, has lived for many years in the far East. After studying the Tibetan language, he took vows and became a Tibetan Buddhist monk. In his tradition (Nyingma), though ancient texts are sometimes studied, a great importance is given to receiving “transmissions” and “empowerments” from respected lamas. In Subud, it is hoped that a new possibility may have opened up to receive empowering transmissions regularly and directly from an unmediated source.

So should a person stop meditating if they want to join Subud? The answer may be different for each individual. I would like Subud to become user-friendly to Buddhists and to others who meditate. The alternative is religious intolerance. When encountering spiritual practitioners who are already travelling along a path of self-awareness, I ask you to be aware of our common aims, and to show respect. Let’s be open towards those who practice meditation and are also drawn to Subud.

Subud aims to welcome people of all religions, but this article has attempted to show that our theistic terminology and glib advice about meditation can create barriers for Buddhists potentially interested in Subud, and asks that we find a way to be more inclusive.