

# A Mevlevi Shaykh's Experience of Subud

Introduced by Iljas Baker

*I was surprised some time ago when a highly respected translator of the works of Rumi who is also a Sufi shaykh in the Mevlevi tradition told me in an email message that he had once been opened in Subud and had done the latihan in the presence of Bapak. As there is a lot of talk in Subud about why people leave Subud/the latihan, I thought it might be interesting to interview this shaykh and hear about his experience of Subud. I submitted a number of questions to him and he responded by providing me with material largely based on a journal he kept at the time. I followed this up with further questions to which he responded by asking me to amend his original writing.*

*As you will see, not only did this Sufi shaykh at one time practice the latihan, but he also opened a number of his acquaintances, both males and females. Despite the efforts of Subud to ensure that only approved individuals ('helpers') pass on the latihan to others it is clearly impossible to restrict the passing on of the latihan in this way. Most people have heard of unofficial openings: J.G. Bennett's opening of his sons after he had ceased being a helper and had left the Subud organization is probably the most high profile example. There are also reports of the latihan being introduced to the followers of Baghwan Sri Rajneesh (now known as Osho).*

*Apart from the knowledge that this 'unofficial' passing on of the latihan takes place, not much has been written about the phenomenon.*

*Obviously, readers will interpret the writing that follows in their own way: some will see it as confirmation that mixing the latihan and other practices just doesn't work, and ultimately one has to choose the latihan or the other practice(s); some will see it as confirmation that the helpers were, in these encounters, deficient and not much has changed, unfortunately. What strikes me is how positively the latihan is viewed by the author of the journal and by the characters who appear in it, but it is viewed as one of a repertoire of techniques that might be practiced rather than as a complete path in its own right, a path that requires commitment, perseverance, giving up all expectations and all desire for spiritual experiences and a willingness to surrender to the Will of God whatever the results might be. Perhaps it's inevitable that many newcomers to Subud will see the latihan as another technique to add to their repertoire. For most of us, seeing the latihan and treating the latihan as a complete path takes time and, of course, the grace of Almighty God, and not simply the advice of the helpers.*

*The fact that the writing consists of direct quotations from a journal as well as writing based on reflections on that period does make the narrative awkward at times but I have let that stand for the sake of authenticity. I have, however, rearranged the order of some of the writing for greater clarity and have left out some parts for the sake of brevity. I have also introduced headings to make it easier to read. The edited version was returned to the author for his approval and he gave his permission for it to be published in a Subud publication.*

*For the record, I am not a Sufi and have no formal links with any Sufi organization. I have quickly lost interest in most books on Sufism that I have tried to read and rarely have I completed one, especially one written by a living shaykh. My relationship with the author of the journal, from which the excerpts that follow have been drawn, is based on an appreciation of Islam and the writings of Rumi. I am entirely satisfied with the way of the latihan and with my spiritual guide, Muhammad Subuh.*

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## A Mevlevi Shaykh's Introduction to the Latihan

I met my first spiritual teacher, 'C' in the summer of 1971 when I was 24 years old. When we met, he presented himself as involved with 'Sufi training' and powerful techniques capable of producing enduring spiritual transformation. My teacher said he was starting a group in California in which he would be passing on many Sufi teachings and techniques that he had learned, as well as powerful meditation methods from other spiritual traditions. I moved to California and believed, for a number of years thereafter, that I was joining a predominantly 'Sufi' group. It was only many years later, when I converted to Islam, that I was able to look back and see that the non-Islamic Sufi groups I had been associated with were led by pseudo-Sufi teachers who believed... that they were teaching the 'essence of Sufism'.<sup>[1]</sup>

What follows are selections from or is based on my journal of 1971 or on my memories of the period after that.

'When the 'Sufi' group with C began in the fall of 1971, he introduced us to the latihan, which he had read and heard about, but into which he had never been initiated. We began with "mini-latihans"<sup>[2]</sup>, in which we sat on the floor and were encouraged to surrender freely in expressing our voices and the movements of our arms and hands. He explained that the aim was to surrender to the Will of God and that the only rule was not to speak to or touch each other during the latihan. All the latihan in the group included men and women together, and he explained that this was against the strict rule in Subud, where men and women always do latihan separately. He also explained that the latihan was a "letting go" form of spiritual practice, an exercise of attunement to the guidance of the present moment — in contrast to other forms, such as those involving concentration and discipline

'Soon after I met C, he told me that I was too rigid and inhibited, and that the latihan could be very beneficial for my spiritual development. He said he did not have the time to join Subud and encouraged me to join Subud instead, so that I could initiate members of the group into this powerful spiritual practice. [Some time after this I did officially receive the Subud latihan.]

'Another time, my teacher introduced the latihan to our group by summarizing Gurdjieff's teachings about the Fourth Way in connection to the four suits of cards in the Tarot: the way of the cup — expressed through spiritual devotion, love, and emotions; the way of the pentacle — expressed in the way of deep spiritual knowledge; the way of the sword — expressed by spiritual will power and concentration; and the way of the wand — the fourth way, which he called "the way of *baraka*"<sup>[3]</sup> and this was more his way than the others.

'He explained that this way is a subtle contagion that spreads consciousness without the absolute necessity of individual extremes of will-power, feelings, or knowledge. Afterwards, to my surprise and delight, he suggested we do a latihan, which is related to "the way of *baraka*". He said he would break the rule in Subud of separating the sexes, and the whole group of about sixty began a sitting latihan. ... I found myself making loud and boisterous vocalizations, mostly gibberish and my arm movements were very intense and energetic. Partly it was because I was troubled by the recent problems with my car, which just barely made it to the meeting.... So I was expressing some of this

frustration in the latihan. But after it was over, I felt quite high.'

### **Being an Applicant in Subud**

'Went to Subud again [as an applicant] and, though feeling very sleepy, [listening to the group doing the latihan] affected me as strongly as ever. [After the latihan], one of the helpers sat next to me, and out of nowhere came this question: "What group does your friend, that recommended Subud to you, belong to?" Now, I had planned to avoid mentioning my other activities as I suspected it would cause trouble and they wouldn't be able to tolerate it, especially if they knew I was doing the latihan elsewhere. I didn't realize it at the time, being so sleepy, that he meant, "What Subud group does your friend belong to?" But his question somehow struck me as so direct that I had a karmic feeling about it, and so it seemed natural to be completely open about my situation. I said that my friend started his own group and that we did various meditations, including the latihan, which hadn't worked out too well yet.

'And sure enough, he told me that the founder of Subud advised *very strongly* that there be no such "mixing". It became clear that, even if our group didn't do the latihan, the fact that I belonged to another meditation group jeopardized my membership in Subud. His responses were very doctrinaire: "Well, all I can say is that Bapak says that...." They said they would "test" whether I should be "opened". I said that it might be biased as they knew about my other meditation group. "Testing" is the asking of God a question, and an answer supposedly comes in the latihan. The whole thing seems so dubious. In a Subud newsletter I found the following: "Testing has also indicated that it is good for us to have coffee after latihan, but only on Fridays." How ridiculous! And it seems obvious that, if Bapak Subuh is more in harmony with the Will of God than any other human, and if he says that there should be no "mixing", then it is not possible for the Will of God to allow such a "heretic" as me to be "opened". I'm convinced that I'm going to be kicked out!

'After the [group] latihan [the following week], I met with some of the "helpers" and wondered whether I might be opened then. The fellow I talked with last week, who said that the founder, Bapak Subuh, had strongly advised against "mixing", told me that it was a very strong test. He had had strong doubts about me and expected a negative answer, but to his surprise, his arms were raised high in the air, and it was a very definite "yes" experience. It was unanimous, and there was even a fourth helper from another group who participated. Another helper warned me that "mixing" might well lead to insanity! He told the story of two people in their group that tried yoga and were committed to an institution. He said that exoteric mixing was not harmful, such as going to a Christian church or being a Muslim and praying several times a day, as he does. But to mix two esoteric groups was dangerous; that, traditionally, one could not switch gurus without getting formal permission from the previous one; that, even though two gurus might be equally spiritual, their vibrations are different and the mixing of them might be harmful. He had belonged to Sufi groups, including Idries Shah's, and he endured great suffering in the latihan as a result. "But," he said, "if God tells us to open somebody, we'll open them." And he added, "The way things are down here, somebody up There must really want you to be in Subud." I said that I hadn't chosen Subud, but had been guided there.

'I felt at this point that it was meant to happen that I be open about my position and my "mixing", and that it be completely clear that I was meant to be in their group. And I was very impressed by the fact that all of us expected the answer to be "no", and that we

were all astounded that the answer was “yes”! Another evening was agreed upon for my opening.’

## My Opening

‘C was very interested in how the Subud group had decided to open me. He said he thinks that these events are part of vast intentions. He sees himself as a channel of a blessing, and that the Group is within this blessing, and that my connection with Subud is significant — as he sees Subud as a powerful training group that is in a stagnant condition.

‘When I returned home, I wrote the Sanskrit word “*naranj*”[4] on twenty oranges and brought them [later] to C’s birthday party. I was in an unusually lively and witty mood. Just before I had to leave, I ate an orange and then told C I was going to be “opened” and jokingly asked him for some of his *baraka*. He playfully twiddled his fingers on my back, and I said that with this “mixing” on the same evening I would surely go insane!

‘When I arrived [for the opening], the helpers did a cleansing latihan and I sat outside. Listening to it helped me to relax and become quiet, and my mind reached a rare degree of stillness as I intensified my meditation. I came in and sat with the three helpers quietly for another ten minutes. Then I was asked to stand near one corner of the room, relax, and close my eyes. The helper who was to open me stood in front of me. He said something about surrendering all personal thoughts and desires to the Will of God. Then they began to do the latihan. For a while, nothing seemed to happen. But gradually my state began to become deeper and deeper. After a while, my head began to raise slowly upwards and descend again and, finally, my body began to twist in a certain rhythm. Sometimes when I was moved, I experienced an amazing tingling all over my body. There were moments when — I can only say that I felt in a state of Grace, and I have never before felt I was in a state of Grace. I don’t know how to describe this experience except to say that it was one of the most significant experiences of my life. I didn’t *have* to move; I was moved by a larger Mind, and it was a miraculous experience. I felt addicted to this latihan and didn’t want it to end. Never before, in all my meditations, have I experienced a state so deep.

‘When it was over, we sat down and the helper that opened me asked the other two if they had smelled oranges. I thought nothing of it at first, but another time when he said that from the corner of the room to my left there came an overpowering scent of orange blossoms, I saw this as the most astounding synchronicity of all the ones I have had since meeting my teacher! He also said that in that same corner he saw an angel or a jinn — he experienced it as a jinn. He said that it had a very powerful and holy presence and was wearing flowing robes. When he looked at it directly, it would vanish, but at other times he could see it out of the corner of his eye. He said that he nearly passed out whenever he went by that corner. He had felt a desire to kneel and bow before this holy presence, but another part of him said to bow only before God. He said that never, in the ten years he had been in Subud, has he experienced anything like this before! The younger helper said that it was a “normal” latihan for him, but the other said that for him it was an unusually light and joyous one. He said that he ended up sitting down and looking at me, and at one point felt a powerful force pushing down on his head, and that this force came from me. It descended down the side of his head and then went away just as I began to move. I told them about the synchronicities of the oranges and my teacher’s birthday and now the orange blossoms! “My friend’s name is *Naranjo*!” I

exclaimed. After this, they talked about various customs of their group which I found uninteresting, but it was part of the ritual. They had to do a purification latihan, and I left and returned to my teacher's party and told him what happened. He was fascinated by the part about the scent of orange blossoms and said, "My name is being played upon!"

'At Subud, I did the latihan for the first time in the regular group. I felt a bit disappointed that it wasn't as blissful an experience as before, but there was one brief moment when I felt that same miraculous Grace. And I learned a lot from this experience, especially in comparing it to the rest of the latihan where I felt "in ego" and "out of Grace". During that moment I felt intense joy and I could completely let go and forget about deciding how to move — I was *moved*! ...Afterward, we listened to a tape of Bapak Subuh, the founder, performing on some kind of Indonesian chimes. It was a latihan in itself and it put me into a very strange state.... I asked one of the helpers what the purification latihan was like after my opening. It involves how the poisonous energies of the one who is opened are exorcised from the opener and the other helpers. Supposedly, a helper can become physically sick unless a purification latihan is done. The helper I asked was the one who "opened" me, and he said that he experienced the final latihan as "very light".'

### **Passing on the Latihan Outside of Subud**

I was never attracted to Subud as an organization, or its members and peculiar beliefs and doctrines, but later I did attend Subud groups only for the sake of the latihan. From 1971 to 1977, I attended Subud latihan sessions during three periods, all less than six months in duration.

The first was in 1971 in Berkeley, California, when I was initiated into the latihan in order to share it with my independent 'Sufi' group, as my teacher had asked me. In preparation for it, I read several books about Subud and completed a three-month probation period of sitting outside the door of the men's latihan room. Not long after my initiation, I stopped going to Subud meetings, and became the leader of latihan (less than ten times, all together in 1972) in groups led by C. None of the members of C's groups joined Subud.

'I taught the latihan to the Sufi group, which numbered two dozen, by explaining the basic aim and rules and began it with the words, "Let the latihan be opened!" I was uncertain whether I would really be able to "open" them, but I proceeded on the assumption that I would indeed be a channel of the sacred energy or *baraka* that I received from Subud, perhaps also mixed with the *baraka* of which my teacher is a channel. I reached the [spiritual] state I have usually reached at Subud and felt it was really working. When it was over and we shared experiences, I received confirmation. R said she felt a powerful blessing flowing through her and that she had an extraordinary vision of the sun, though it was behind the clouds. Another said he had joined Subud several years ago and tried the latihan six or seven times and nothing happened. This time, however, something happened! Another found it to be a great release.... During the dinner break, I felt greatly drained — mostly, I think, because the one who "opens" others in the latihan can become exhausted from being such a channel. The blessing goes out to the others and much of their psychic poison flows back, being displaced. Indeed, I felt rotten, with a headache and physical pain throughout my body.'

'[At Esalen Institute, in California, well-known for social experimentation] K and I got to talking... and suddenly she asked me to "open" her. We did the latihan on the lawn and

became oblivious to all observers. We vented a lot of the rage and despair of being trapped in ego. Toward the end, as I surrendered more, it became more joyous. As we stood up at the end, I embraced her and kissed her. She said later that when our lips met, everything became orange! (a reminder of another opening!)

'[Later that evening] I was asked to lead a latihan there, and with my teacher's presence, it was almost as high an experience for me as my "opening". Afterward, I lay down on my back and suddenly R was with me, weeping uncontrollably, soon followed by K. We were all holding each other and it was very sexual. Several more people joined the pile on the floor, and soon my pants were unzipped. I was so high and tranquil that I had no self-consciousness at all about being exposed like that; I felt so serene that I was not sexually aroused. Afterwards, I said that I realized why, in Subud, they separate the sexes so that it doesn't become sexual! This proved how latihan can generate a tremendous sexual energy when men and women do it together — especially toward the leader. The afternoon session was ended at this point. I hurried back to my room; I felt nauseous and completely uninterested in being sexual and was exhausted by being the "opener" and absorbing all the negative debris, and slept soundly. That evening I was so high and joyous, and amazingly unselfconscious.'

The second period was in Los Angeles, during my second year of introduction to the Mevlevi Sufi tradition in 1976. It was there that I attended a latihan led by Bapak Subuh, which was a joyous and sacred experience.

The third period was during six months during 1976-77, when my wife and I lived in Portland, Oregon. We had been invited to leave Los Angeles and move to Portland in order to associate with an American Muslim dervish, who had long been involved with Subud there. Our friend encouraged us to make a spiritual journey to visit Sufis and Sufi tombs in Turkey and India. I have not participated in the latihan since living in Portland.

### **Why I Discontinued the Latihan**

Looking back nearly forty years later, I can see how there was a fundamental clash of viewpoints: Members of Subud were dedicated to protecting the purity of the latihan and therefore warned participants not to mix the latihan with other esoteric spiritual practices, whereas I was loyal to a group led by a spiritual teacher who was deliberately mixing esoteric spiritual practices from many traditions.

Why did I discontinue the latihan? First, because I had fulfilled the assignment given me to import it into my first spiritual group. Second, when I did the latihan during two brief periods later in the 1970s, I viewed myself as a student of Sufism who was affiliated with the Mevlevi path of Sufism. And third, I was not yet ready to accept that Sufism is based on Islam and so I didn't appreciate the close connection of Subud to Islam.

Now, when I reflect on the latihan, I am amazed how similar it is to descriptions of the *samâ`* among various Sufi traditions, a practice (that began in Baghdad in the mid-ninth century) involving ecstatic listening, inspired by mystical music and poetry, that led to spontaneous movements (including dance-like movements that could include whirling) and vocalizations. Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi did the *samâ`* in this spontaneous way, and so did his followers (the Mevlevi) until the *samâ`* was formalized in the sixteenth century as the now famous Mevlevi 'Whirling Prayer Ceremony' ('Sema' in Turkish).

For centuries, *samâ`* was done by groups of men. If it took place outside, women have been described as watching from their homes (reports of women doing *samâ`* together are rare). The groups that were most respected maintained high standards. One rule was that 'beardless youths' were forbidden to participate, so that homoerotic desires would be minimized. From what I have written above, the wisdom of forbidding women to participate together with men in either the traditional *samâ`* or the latihan was proven to me (although it should be kept in mind that it was California in the 1970s, when social innovation was common).

### Notes:

1. Many Muslims who are Sufis take the position that you can't be an authentic Sufi if you are not also a Muslim. A standard interpretation is that Sufism is esoteric Islam and all authentic Sufi orders have a line of transmission going back to the Prophet Muhammad. However, Sufism is not officially accepted within all Muslim countries, e.g. Saudi Arabia.

2. In this and subsequent paragraphs in this section the author, somewhat confusingly, moves between talking about the spontaneous exercises his group did and the latihan as it is generally conceived in Subud. When he refers to 'mini-latihans' he is obviously referring to the spontaneous exercises his group did prior to his receiving of the latihan in the usual way, i.e. through the intermediary of a helper. Presumably, they thought of these spontaneous exercises as latihan of some kind. Later there is a suggestion that the real latihan is more powerful and hence the instruction the author received from 'C' to go and get opened.

3. '*baraka*' means sacred power or energy.

4. '*naranj*' is the Sanskrit word from which is derived the English word 'orange'.