

# An Alternative Introduction

By Stefan Freedman

This is a personal account which might also be used as an alternative introduction to Subud. It will probably resonate best with agnostic and “spiritually freelance” people (this would include many of the people that my dance group work connects me with internationally). I owe much to Salamah Pope, Harris Smart and to many others for sections of the wording and content.

Suggestion for improving it? Please write to me: [stefan@freedmans.fsbusiness.co.uk](mailto:stefan@freedmans.fsbusiness.co.uk)

## *Subtle Energy* (a personal account of Subud)

There are moments when conflicting thoughts come into alignment. Fear, confusion and the need for approval are absent. Perception enlarges, and you act with calm clarity. I used to experience this clarity only rarely and randomly. But my situation began to change after I learned of a process that helped me to access it regularly. My inner radar became more effective, and revealed hidden character strengths. As a result I have taken interesting new directions in my life and my work.

There are many exercises for developing calm, balance and insight, but the one that I had come across is not publicised and is little known. Originating in Java in Indonesia, the approach is called the *latihan*. The worldwide association whose members practice it is named Subud, and the core practice gives a palpable charge of life-enhancing energy. This current can be tapped into any time, and requires no formal training, no retreats or lengthy sitting sessions, and as such is easily integrated into a modern active life.

Subud practitioners are of all faiths and none. Since it is based on direct experience rather than doctrine, each person has a different response, according to their own individual nature. In fact, one of the results many appreciate is getting to know their own character and nature better.

Many practitioners report that the *latihan* helps them to shed the endless concerns, turbulent emotions and sense of physical tightness that can accrue during everyday life. In some instances people have reported that practising the *latihan* has alleviated or healed chronic illness and addictions. (In my case, insomnia and eye pain that had been chronic since childhood disappeared shortly after I started to practise the *latihan*.)

One's first *latihan*, appropriately called the “opening”, can be thought of as an awakening. What is awakened is a person's underlying nature, which early social conditioning may have masked. Over time the *latihan* will often augment the intuitive faculty. Some find indications about their natural talents, and their outer lives may change and evolve beyond their expectation.

My capacity for living to the full has grown in unexpected ways since I began

practising the *latihan*. I have developed confidence and resilience. I was previously “all up in my head” and very awkward in my body but to the amazement of myself and my family, the *latihan* prompted me to discover a pleasure in dancing. After ten years of practising the *latihan* I embarked on an unusual career, choreographing and travelling the world teaching groups to dance and sing. This calls upon and is developing all my resources, and I often feel the *latihan*’s vitality when I’m “in flow”, working well.

There are many proven spiritual sources, and some of my friends find in prayer or meditation the deep enrichment I attribute to the *latihan*. I have no interest in suggesting that *latihan* is more effective than other methods. My hope is for it to become better known as another available option. When I practise the *latihan* it feels to me like a spiritual homecoming. Yet it has resulted in me becoming more practical, confronting my fears, and developing skills in dealing with conflict.

For many people the *latihan* is a catalyst for change, but having said that, I need to emphasise that the personal evolution is different for each individual. I may have given the impression that the *latihan* helps people to develop artistic qualities, but that’s just in my particular case. There are people in all walks of life who attribute to the *latihan* some evolution in their work, and others who find that the *latihan* has more of an inward effect. Generally the action is gradual, over time, and no specific result can be guaranteed.

What actually happens at a Subud meeting is that we begin sitting quietly for around five minutes and then stand relaxed. (To reduce distraction or shyness, women and men normally receive the exercise in separate rooms.)

To practise the *latihan* involves no instructions, set words or rituals. No images to focus the mind on, no goals to strive for. Nothing except the arising of a gentle vibration. What I found very remarkable, at first, is that *the latihan* will often result in the arising of spontaneous movements and sounds. Most soon feel an impulse to move, and may find themselves singing or speaking, shouting, praying, dancing, weeping or laughing. During this time a participant remains fully conscious and alert. The impulse to move, which accompanies the *latihan*’s revitalising action, is spontaneous, not contrived or suggested by thought. There is no hysteria or trance involved. After practising with a group for two or three months, the *latihan* can also be done at home.

The *latihan* tends to become very peaceful towards the end, leaving participants with a sense of being restored. The whole process takes only thirty to forty minutes.

*Latihan* can be deeply engaging but does not “take over” and can be easily and instantaneously stopped. You open your eyes and the *latihan* ends—it’s as simple as that. This energy seems to work from *behind*, as it were, the human heart and mind.

Subud is based on experience and is not a new religion. Religious members generally continue to practise their own religions, and some discover fresh insights and renewed faith. Those who might be called “spiritual freelance”, who feel an affinity with many diverse paths, find in the *latihan* unmediated guidance. This can support the growth of awareness and balance.

What about someone who does not relate to the idea of either a higher self or a God, who would perhaps describe him- or herself as “down-to-earth and definitely not spiritual”? Such a person, for example, an agnostic or an atheist, is very warmly welcomed. The truest assessment of the *latihan* is by a scientific mind or a questioning person who is open-minded enough to test it out.

The *latihan* action is subtle but strongly palpable. No prior faith is needed. Words and images can't easily convey the surprising quality of the process. For many it plays a key part in and enlivens their spiritual life. Those who would try it are advised to persist for a realistic period (perhaps a year) before making an objective assessment of the benefits.

In general the aim of the Subud association is to enable people to practise *latihan*, to develop their humanity, to live a life of value, and to move towards integration, harmony and completeness.

At Subud international gatherings, Africans and Europeans—humanists, devoutly religious and agnostic people—Israelis and Arabs—have experienced the *latihan* together. The Subud organisation is international and multi-faith. World Congresses are held each time in a different country, and committees are temporary, with the intention that, in serving the association's needs, there should be no single locus of influence or power.

The Subud association provides co-ordination and support for welfare projects, the arts, ethical enterprises, peace activities, health, education and youth work. These are initiated by interested members, and participation is entirely optional.

The *latihan* was first experienced by a Javanese man known as Pak Subuh, who was born in 1901. It can be transmitted simply from person to person (like a candle flame) and has been a worldwide movement since the early 1950s. The word Subud is a contraction of three Sanskrit words, *susila*, *budhi* and *dharma*, which taken together Pak Subuh explained as meaning "guided from within to take action in the world".

There is no enrolment fee or subscription. Members give what they can to meet administrative expenses, on a free and voluntary basis.

Subud is open to anyone aged seventeen or over. There is an introductory period to ensure that enquirers have enough information and are steady in their wish to join.

**Some key points:**

- transmitted from person to person
- individual process
- catalyst for change
- restorative and calming
- no enrolment fee

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Note: Subud is pronounced a bit like Soobood; "u"s are pronounced as in "put".