



A First Introduction to Subud

adapted from Roseanna Sawrey-Cookson

Although it is based upon a religious experience, Subud is not in itself a religion, nor is it a teaching. It is an acknowledgement of the Power of God which fills and controls the whole universe, both that which can be seen and that which is invisible to our ordinary sight, and it is also the experience of this power at work within each individual. There is no dogma in Subud, no creed and no priesthood. Neither is there a leader other than the One Almighty God. In common with the great religions of the world, its members hold that God cannot be comprehended by the mind of man. All that is required of us is that we should, in patience and sincerity, surrender and submit our own will to the Will of God. Subud is neither of the East nor the West, but is of all mankind, one humanity facing One Almighty God. It is not new for the experience is as old as humanity, the Grace of God bestowed upon human beings according to His Will; but there is something new in it, for this appears to be the first time in human history that it has been made so easy for mankind to receive it.

Historically speaking, Subud began in about 1925, when a Javanese man named Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo first received a dramatic, unexpected contact with the Power of the Light of Almighty God. This initiated a period of three years of intensive action within his soul. At the end of this time he was told, in answer to his prayer, that this gift might be shared; that it was not for himself alone, but that he might transmit it to everyone who asked for it, although he was not to seek people out but only to wait for them to come to him and inquire. At first only his own family and immediate neighbours received it, but gradually people came from other parts of Indonesia, received the contact, and in due course were in turn authorised by Pak Subuh to pass it on to others.

It was not until 1956 that Subud first reached the West. The name Subud (or Soeboed in the old spelling) was first used in 1947 and since that time it has spread to nearly every country in the world. No official effort is made to publicise it, and it spreads mainly through personal introduction and living example. Nevertheless, a number of books have by now been written on the subject by various people and have served to awaken interest in readers who recognise something for which, consciously or unconsciously, they have been seeking.

Pak Subuh -- Pak or Bapak is the Indonesian form of address for an older or respected man -- made many journeys outside his own country during the years following 1957 and until quite shortly before his death in 1987. In 1957 he left Indonesia for the first time in his life and came to England for a few months at the invitation of a small group of people who had received the contact through a European who had lived for some time in Indonesia. Many hundreds of people came into Subud during those months in the second half of 1957, some of them from other places in Europe, Africa, Australia and America, and these in turn invited Pak Subuh to visit them in their own countries.

Pak Subuh was not a teacher or a leader, but was more like a spiritual guide. He gave guidance, exegesis and advice; but as he explained, all the teaching necessary for mankind has already been given to us in the great religions of the world. Subud does not separate anyone from his own religion, but rather brings to us the possibility of living in accordance with those teachings, cleansing those who practise it of impurities and eventually enabling them to become what they were created to be.

The transmission of the Subud contact did not depend on the presence of Pak Subuh, and he authorised many men and women, in every country in which Subud is established, to act as his helpers and representatives in this and other ways. These "helpers" are not necessarily of any high spiritual development, although some, after forty or fifty or more years in Subud, may indeed have attained this to some extent. Helpers are chosen from among those available with sufficient experience and were originally appointed only by Pak Subuh, but since his death they are appointed by a group of helpers who serve for a term as what are known as "International Helpers." No-one not so appointed has the right to act in this capacity.

The word "Subud" is not directly connected with Pak Subuh's name, but is an abbreviation of three Sanskrit words: Susila, Budhi, and Dharma. In Subud, these are approximately translated as follows: Susila means right living in accordance with the Will of God; Budhi means the inner force residing within the nature of man himself; Dharma means surrender and submission to the Power of God.

The latihan is the basis of Subud. Latihan is an Indonesian word meaning approximately training or exercise, and these words -- or their equivalent in other languages -- are sometimes used synonymously. But in English the word latihan is usually preferred, since its very unfamiliarity helps to dispel any confusion that this resembles or can be compared with some already familiar concept or experience. The latihan cannot be taught or imitated, for it arises spontaneously from within after the contact with the Power of God has been received by transmission through a person in whom it is already established, and it is different for each individual according to his or her needs. It does not arise through any human action or volition, nor by the use of the heart and mind, but simply by the Will and Grace of God. At the same time, the human will is free at any moment to intervene and stop the action of the latihan, which continues only as long as we willingly submit to it.

Those who are authorised to transmit the contact -- the "helpers" -- do nothing to or for the person who receives it. They simply follow their own latihan together with the new member who has come to receive it, and of its own accord the same process then begins in him or her, and continues thereafter to work in them without the need for any use of thought and desire or any act of will beyond the initial consent. All that is required, either at the time of first receiving the contact or on any subsequent occasions on which the latihan is followed, is an inner attitude of sincere submission of one's own will to the Will of God.

The latihan is practised twice weekly in company with other members of one's own sex, accompanied by one or more of the helpers, who are responsible for timing the half-hour period for which it generally lasts. After a few months' experience, members are usually ready to add a further half-hour latihan alone, but they are strongly advised not to exceed this total of three latihans a week.

Experiences in the latihan vary enormously. It is different for everyone, and for each person at different times. In the beginning it usually takes the form of physical movement and sounds. This is the normal outer manifestation of the touch of the Power of God, similar to the manner in which a musical instrument will sound and vibrate when played by a human being. As time goes on the experiences often become more subtle and more refined.

The latihan is thus unadulterated worship of God through surrender to God's Will, and its action is one of purification and inner growth. All of us have many impurities, both those inherited and those acquired through our own mistakes. There is much that needs to be put right in us, and this correcting is done in a way that we could not possibly do for ourselves. No teaching, no imposed discipline and no imitation, but only the Power of God, can penetrate to the level within us at which this work must be done. Only God can know what is necessary for each of us. This is why there is no teaching in Subud by man to man; God alone is the teacher.

This process of purification is a gradual one and goes according to the needs of each individual, his capacity to receive it, and his willingness to accept it. The power that works in the latihan is infinitely strong, but it forces no-one against his will. In so far as we accept and submit our own will to the Will of God the process goes forward. It begins on the physical level and frequently results in an improvement in physical health, but its action can never be predicted. All that can be said is that each one receives what is truly right and necessary for oneself, so long as one truly surrenders and submits one's own will with patience and sincerity. The rate at which purification proceeds varies for each individual and cannot be hurried or assisted by any efforts on our part. All that we can do is to accept what we receive and to refrain from wrong behaviour that might undo the work that is being done within us.

Subud is for the outer as well as for the inner life, both for individual members and for the association as a whole, and therefore, besides the latihan, it has its organization for worldly matters. This organization is collectively known as the World Subud Association. Every Subud centre has its own committee as well as its own helpers group, and the two work closely together, each in its own clearly defined sphere. In countries where there is already a national organization there is also a National Committee responsible for organizational matters on a national scale. These committee responsibilities cover finance, provision of places for the latihan, the organization of charitable and commercial undertakings where these exist, and the like. The helpers are responsible for transmitting the contact to new members, arranging and being present at the communal latihan, giving explanations about Subud to those who come to ask about it, answering questions from members

concerning the latihan, advising the committee as required, visiting and doing the latihan with the sick and so on. Neither helpers nor committee exercise any power, and only undertake their various duties and responsibilities as a means of service. To these local structures of the organization are added regional helpers and committees, if necessary, and also an International Helpers' group to serve alongside the International Subud Committee. (All these bodies are appointed for a limited period of time, and those who serve on them are not regarded in any way as special or superior).

The Subud organizational side is financed in part by donations and voluntary contributions from members, but Pak Subuh's intention was that finance should be chiefly supplied by donations from enterprises carried on, either individually or collectively, by the members. He suggested that they should consider donating up to 25% of their profit after deducting taxes and after, of course, allowing for all reasonable operating expenses. This is increasingly being done.

Besides meeting these direct expenses, the Subud organization also has a separate arm for charitable work. This is known as Susila Dharma International and is a Non-Governmental Organization affiliated with the United Nations Organization. In most countries the Subud organization, which is non-profit, is registered as a charity and is therefore exempt from taxes, so that all donations can be used for Subud purposes.

Subud is open to any sincere individual over the age of seventeen, without regard to race, colour, creed, religion, etc. Those who wish to join are generally asked to wait for a period of three months after they first apply, and if at the end of that time they are still of the same mind, then usually they can start.

Many thousands have come to Subud and some have gone away again. It is a gift freely given, but this does not necessarily make it an easy path to follow. Purification and sanctification may not always be completely comfortable. Subud makes no claims, and in spiritual matters there is no compulsion, but to those who feel drawn to it we simply say, come -- and see for yourself.

- London England, circa 1966 and Canberra Australia, 1995