

What is Subud?

The following explanation of Subud is excerpted from

I Saw A Molten White Light, an autobiography

by well-known actor, Peter Mark Richman

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13. SUBUD—MY SPIRITUAL SEARCH IS ANSWERED

While I had been gone, Phyllis Love, my girl in *Friendly Persuasion*, had spoken to Teddi about an English gentleman, John Bennett, who was going to give a talk at the French Institute about a new spiritual pursuit called Subud. He was a physicist who had written a book on the subject called “Concerning Subud.” Teddi was fearful that I would reject her wish to attend, but I was immediately willing. At the lecture, attended by about a hundred people, the Englishman droned on and on about this new way to receive a contact with the power of God, first received and brought into this world by a man from Indonesia named Bapak Subuh. When exercised, this power acquired by the contact would awaken your inner life or sleeping soul. I was astounded. Awaken my sleeping soul? I found that extremely interesting, so much so that I fell asleep. When I woke up, Bennett was answering questions from the audience. For some reason, I had a compulsion to ask a question so I raised my hand and when called blurted out, like I knew what in hell I was asking: “Uhh... in Subud... uhh... what about your karma?” There was a pause, then in a polite answer that bordered on dismissal, the evening was over. Teddi was beaming and ready to sign up, but since I never jump at anything, I took a bit longer to scribble my name, signifying that we were candidates for the spiritual brotherhood, group or organization of something called Subud. As it turned out, it was the most momentous decision I have ever made in my life—and I have never doubted for one second that it was the right one for me to make.

That evening we also learned that Bapak Subuh was born on June 22, 1901, in Semarang, Java, and his full name was Bapak Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo. (“Bapak” is Indonesian for father and is informal like saying Mister. “Subuh” means dawn in the Indonesian language and it is the time when he was born.) In 1924, Bapak, who worked for the municipality and was also studying bookkeeping, usually went for a walk at midnight for some fresh air to clear his head. One evening while walking, something quite strange happened unexpectedly. He saw a brilliant light above him that turned everything into day, and this light, as bright as the sun, suddenly accelerated and entered his head and filled his whole body. He started to shake violently and thought he was having a heart attack. He managed to get back to his home and immediately went to his bed to prepare to die. He didn’t die; he fell peacefully asleep. Then he heard a voice inside of him that said: *Awake... rise... walk.* He didn’t understand, but was not afraid. He was a Muslim so he was made to do his Muslim prayers. He didn’t know who was making him move and talk, but he had

faith and felt at peace and surrendered to this power—the power, he thought, must be the power of God. This experience went on for a thousand nights and changed him completely and was the origin of Bapak's Opening and the beginning of the latihan. Later, Bapak realized that according to God's plan, he was meant to pass on this contact to anyone who wished to receive it and that it embraced all religions and all peoples.

Whaaaa? Hold on there a second! Whooa! Are you kidding me? The Opening... the latihan? What in the hell is this all about anyway?

Well, here goes, and I'm going to try to keep this as simple as possible. If I offend anyone I will say beforehand that I'm sorry, and please forgive me. We found out that the candidate had an obligation to attend a meeting once a week for a three-month probationary period to talk to the "helpers," who would further explain what this Subud stuff was all about. (Helpers were people who were in Subud for a while and doing the latihan and were qualified to give answers to any questions that we may have.) After having all our curiosity and questions satisfactorily answered, we could be opened and receive the Contact if we wished to.

The latihan? What is that, pray tell? Can't you be a little more specific? I'm really curious about that...

Latihan is an Indonesian word that means training or exercise. It is the spiritual training in Subud once you have been opened. To be graphic, it's like getting the switch turned on... letting your soul breathe so that you can get in touch with your real self.

Indonesian? Why Indonesian?

Only God has the answer to why Bapak Subuh, an ordinary young man in Indonesia, was chosen to be the first one to receive the latihan in our time.

Okay... well, how do you get this latihan?

When the new candidate is ready to be opened, he stands in the middle of a group of helpers, or it may be only two or three helpers, who then proceed to do the latihan around him. If the person is willing to surrender and let go, this contact is automatically transferred to the new person like a fissionable chain reaction. Once opened, you then do the latihan twice a week for about thirty minutes.

Who trains you or exercises you?

Here's where it can get a bit sticky and weird sounding, but bear with me. The training or exercise that you do in the latihan is granted to you by the great life force... or, to put it another way, the big one Himself... GOD! God has opened you by way of the helpers, and He will now train you in the latihan.

God will? Really? Uh, huh... Oh, well... hmmm... whew, this is tough to digest. Well, okay. Tell me what happens in the latihan?

Lots of things happen. It's the reality of Subud controlled by God when you are in submission to Him. It's a direct personal experience of a higher power in our everyday lives. God knows you better than you know yourself, and certainly He knows that other person inside of you, the sleeping one, which truly is your soul—and once awakened, a whole process of cleansing away accumulated impurities, illnesses and sins, even ancestral sins... and then positive growth is triggered because the teacher inside of you, God, can now guide that newly alive soul. Once you have

felt the latihan, it is unmistakable. You may move, walk about, dance, yell, exercise, speak in other tongues, sing ancient songs, and even say gibberish... but you are not doing it—it is the “other” you who is expressing himself, your inner life who is having a workout. You can stop the latihan at any time. It’s not a trance, but worship. God has allowed you to worship Him. In this process of worship you are being cleansed and every part of you is being improved.

Holy cow... I’ve slugged along with your autobiography until now, but this is too way out. I’m not going to get proselytized into some spooky cult thing, for goodness sake!

No, no... there is no proselytizing in Subud, that’s why you haven’t heard of it, but I’m writing about my life and Subud has been a major part of it for forty-four years. I’m expressing my experience in Subud, my point of view and what it has meant to me. Teddi and I were early initiates into Subud and we’ve been helpers for the forty-four years we’ve been in it, so you could say that we’re a couple of elders. And by the way, Subud is not a cult, nor is it a religion. It is before all religions. You may keep your own religion. It is important to do so and continue to practice it. Subud gives sustenance, understanding, and a new dimension to your chosen religion because it is the source of all religions. The power of God was there before religion.

What does Subud mean?

I thought you would never ask! Subud is a contraction of three Sanskrit words and is part of the original human language: Susila, Budhi and Dharma. Susila means a man’s character, a humane person having truly human feelings toward his fellow creatures; someone with good behavior who lives rightly. Budhi is the essence, force, or power within all of us given to us by God—the soul. Dharma means the surrender to that force, which is submission to God who has awakened you. Scholars and researchers have unearthed scrolls, stones, and ancient historical documents relative to many faiths. Tons of books and zillions of words have been expressed concerning religions, their origin, spiritual perspectives and their varied conclusions. It’s all valid and good, but maybe a bit slanted here or there to arrive at a desired objective. But truly, there are more questions than answers in all of that, profound questions, in my opinion, that cannot be answered by accepted practices and conventional thinking.

Oh? Are you setting yourself up as some wise-ass, know-it-all?

Heavens no! I want to share what I’ve come to understand. Now, I just want to say a few words about my filtered analysis of spiritual history in an overly simplistic way. As an actor, I always like to get to the simple essentials and avoid complications, which only muddy things up. Besides, and I’m smiling when I say this, this is my book and I can say anything I want!

Here’s my take on the subject, which has been gestating in my brain for a long time (again, I’m sorry if I offend anyone):

Before the present time, I believe God gave the gift of His latihan only to his messengers, enlightened men like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad—prime prophets all, and the most revered. They had the gift, but they were not permitted to transfer it! God didn’t wish for them to transfer it at that time, it wasn’t needed. So, when these prophets died, man made a religion out of what they had brought. They had brought the words of God, and it was enough, and it was good, and humankind

could live by those words when life was simpler—but it is not enough for today. Today, in the age of cynicism and modern chaos, when we have the ability to destroy the world with our tremendous technical advancement, we are truly at the edge of the abyss. So, God, in his infinite mercy, sent another messenger for the present time (it may be our last chance), but this fellow had a different job to do than all the other men who had preceded him. Bapak Subuh had the tremendous task of passing on the latihan to anyone who wished to receive it in almost every country of the world—and he has traveled the world over many times (Subud is in 81 countries), designating helpers to help him so that each person, individually, could be opened and experience true worship through the power of God and begin to understand and give credence to the meaning of the religion he or she was born into, because the Subud latihan is the foundation upon which all religions are based. The power of God was there before man was ever formed.

There, I've said it and I'm glad.

Uhhh, that's pretty interesting. I have never heard of anything like that before. What does it feel like when you do this, uh... latihan?

How do you explain the taste of a strawberry unless you have tasted one? Subud is there for you to taste if you want it. It is all up to you.

I want to get back to the night that my wife and I received the opening in Subud. We had been candidates for the required three months, finding out what it was all about by talking to the male and female helpers in the New York Subud group. The male helpers were an eclectic bunch: a retired executive, a book dealer, a salesman, and an actor. They were renting the second floor of an office building on Seventh Avenue and 27th Street to do the latihan. I spent most of my time discussing Subud with the elderly actor, whose name was Reynold Osborne. He was a dear man, very patient and helpful. Subud was so new to the West, it's of interest to note that he'd been opened only three months prior to me; in less than three months after my opening, I became a New York helper. Subud was spreading rapidly around the world and helpers were needed quickly to satisfy the requests for explanations and openings. Bapak Subuh was supposed to open me and several other candidates, and his wife, Ibu, was to do the same with the women, but his plane was late from Mexico. Consequently, I was opened by the physicist John Bennett, who I'd heard lecture, and his wife opened Teddi.

In a large, semi-darkened room, I was told to stand with arms at my side and relax; after hearing a statement read which basically said that I was willing to accept God's grace in submission to his will, Mister Bennett said, "Begin." I had my eyes closed, which I was supposed to do, and in the latihan I began to hear soft singing with words I couldn't distinguish, sounds and grunts, and the noises of people shuffling about. This went on for a few minutes and I didn't feel a thing happening to me, but there were all kinds of goings on around me. I didn't know what to expect and maybe I wasn't supposed to expect anything. Suddenly, I felt like I was being pushed backwards. *Uh, oh... hello... what the hell is that*, I said to myself! I kind of resisted and tried to stand still in my place. Again, I was pushed back as if a powerful gust of wind was propelling me. It was definitely happening, so I just went along with it and stopped any resistance. I was moved continually backwards and the strength of

the push kept getting stronger—feeling almost as if I would be thrown over on my head, but I wasn't. Finally, after thirty minutes I heard Mister Bennett say, "Finish!" and the latihan stopped. I was now officially opened in Subud and I was mystified and more than ecstatic by what I had just experienced. Since that time, I have come to believe that this is what it truly means to be reborn—when your soul is awakened from a deep sleep and begins to stretch and thrash about. And every soul is different—so the coming alive varies with each person, but it is really you coming alive. Our openings had taken place on April 30, 1959 at 8:00 p.m. We don't know what it means, but our son, Gard (later given a Subud name, Howard) was born April 30, 1958 at 5:00 p.m., Los Angeles time. Exactly one year earlier to the hour! (*An Important note: Bapak Subuh was a practicing Muslim when he received the opening in Subud. His religion has nothing whatsoever to do with the crazy, murderous Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists who later have cruelly and totally distorted and corrupted the religion of Islam to their own insanity.)

Soon after joining Subud, I felt so grateful for my good fortune that now, in the present time, I was getting a taste of what the messengers of God had felt. Not to the same degree, of course, but a taste... an itchy-tasty taste. (I was beginning to get a glimmer of what the molten white light I saw as a child may have meant.) Because of this, I wanted to tell everyone I met. I would corner someone I knew and say, "Let me tell you about this fantastic thing that happened to me" and before I was through, I could see their eyebrows go up and their eyes glaze over and then the inevitable: "My, that is interesting... listen, I'm supposed to meet my wife so forgive me for rushing off." I remember elaborating a bit to Frank Corsaro, the director of *A Hatful of Rain* who I had just gotten an apartment for in our building. Frank was a practicing Catholic and I don't know if what I had said was too challenging or sacrilegious, or both, but he wasn't buying my story. He appreciated my conviction, but it was with a typical Corsaro laughing dismissal. I wasn't trying to snare anyone, I just had a compelling desire to share.

At one point we visited Philadelphia, and aside from the good and less-good feelings always generated when visiting my family, I couldn't help but tell them about Subud. They were used to hearing way-out things from their unconventional, "artistic" brother, so this was more or less another fairy tale like a Disney movie. I saw faint momentary sparks in my brother Dave's eyes, but they were quickly extinguished. My mother, I couldn't even begin to approach, and my sister, Fay, strangely enough, came to visit us many years later and was opened in the Los Angeles group. In 1970, my niece Laura and her husband, Alan, visited us and wanted to hear all about Subud, eventually joining a group in Philadelphia. Everyone else I encountered was stone deaf. I had surely found a way to deaden the air and turn people off, so I decided to give it a rest. As for myself, I was thrilled having this joyous secret going on inside of me.

Getting back on stage was a need of mine that gnawed at me like an itch. Shooting film is a "fits and starts" kind of acting that is not completely satisfying for an actor. I have always felt the compulsion to find a way to work on stage with an audience, just to keep the instrument tuned up. I'll never forget a famous film actor appearing in a play on Broadway and how uncomfortable he was. He'd been doing

films for so long, he looked as if he were shooting close-ups the whole play, having become so restricted in his body that he couldn't move and talk at the same time. John Osborne was a hot playwright and his blistering "anti-everything" was well expressed in *Look Back in Anger*. In the summer of 1959, I put together a package with Phyllis Love (now in Subud too); my wife, Teddi, to play the other woman; and Lou Antonio, a good young actor who later became a very successful TV director. We opened at the Capri Theater in Atlantic Beach, Long Island, and ran for a week, with me ranting and raving as Jimmy Porter. It was a good play to get the creative juices flowing again. Doubly so, when we found out after an evening performance that Lee Strasberg, surprisingly, had come to see us. All four of us were his students, and he thought we all had done good work, which was very gratifying and made our egos soar. Praise from Caesar is indeed praise! Reflecting on that, I had become acutely aware since doing the latihan (this secret inside of me) that it helped my concentration and relaxation on stage.

Earl Holliman had a Western TV series called *Hotel de Paree*, so I flew out to the coast to play another elegant bad guy with a sly smile and a black heart. In every show I worked on, I tried to create a little different element about the character, so that each appearance might seem to be someone else playing the part; this was especially true in Westerns, where a regional dialect, a moustache, a beard, or a particular choice of clothing could alter your look dramatically. I was always very fussy with the costumers and wardrobe department about the clothes I wore—the cut of the garments and the complimentary accessories. I once went through Western Costumers and Twentieth Century Fox's collection of hats before I found the right one for another Western character—an Australian wide-brim straw hat, with a bandana coming down to cover a fire-scarred face. I suppose it was appreciated because the costumers invited me to speak at a Universal Studios meeting once about how important I felt their contribution was to the actor's portrayal.

I was still in Los Angeles working with Earl Holliman, a good actor and a perfect gentleman, when I found out that Bapak Subuh, on his limited tour, was coming to town to open new candidates, give a couple of talks, and do the latihan with the developing Los Angeles group. This was only a few weeks after being with him in New York after my introduction to Subud. I was very pleased to be able to be in his presence again. Although he was a very ordinary looking Indonesian with a gracious manner, you couldn't help but sense his profound depth as a human being. And even though I was new to the experience, doing the latihan with him in the room was of a full-blast higher quality. This was a man chosen by God, a messenger, to bring the gift of the contact to everyone who wished to receive it. (Every time I say that, I hear in my head somebody's retort: What the hell kind of gushy spiritual stuff is this guy handing me! But, the truth of my understanding is what I am writing about.)

One evening I remember going out to a junior high school in Alhambra, California, a sleepy suburb on the edge of Los Angeles. There, it seemed to me, were hundreds of people waiting patiently to be opened. Word had gotten around that when Bapak was present you could be opened immediately—with helpers you had to wait the three months. That evening, it had to be done in shifts to accommodate the crowd,

and I thought: *Where does Bapak get the energy?* Later, as I walked away toward my car after doing the latihan, I looked back at the school and heard these prayerful utterances, raucous noises, and melodious reverential singing coming from the second latihan that had just begun. I have often wondered, what did the neighbors think and whatever happened to all those opened people?