Entering the Mind as a Way of Approaching God: Practicing Meditation and Being Muslim in Semarang, Indonesia

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This article examines how Muslim meditation practitioners in Indonesia understand and apply Buddhist meditative practices. Focusing on the narrative of one such practitioner, we highlight the often-overlooked role that meditation plays in the everyday life of a Muslim. We pay special attention to how three meditation-related themes are entwined with the performance of the Islamic obligatory daily prayers to open up a space for contemplating and reconceiving a relationship with God as our interlocutor attempts to make sense of life with God as the ultimate referent. While at first glance the act of combining meditation with Islamic daily prayers may appear incompatible with the formalistic view of Islam, we seek to demonstrate that the labelling of meditation as 'cultural' and 'scientific' allows our interlocutor to build a narrative that inserts the importance of being mindful in the effort of moral striving.

Keywords: Buddhism; Indonesia; Islam; Meditation; Narrative

INTRODUCTION

Meditation, especially in the context of a specific Buddhist technique of paying attention to the flow of one's breath and mind (known as *vipassana*), has increasingly gained popularity for the therapeutic benefits it claims to produce for its practitioners, regardless of their religious affiliations (McMahan & Braun, 2017; Wallace, 2003). In Indonesia, particularly in the island of Java, the positive reception of a meditative technique such as that found in Buddhism is partly facilitated by the distinctively syncretic, eclectic strand of Islam that blends other apparently non-Islamic practices (generally coupled together under the label mysticism or Hindu-Buddhist tradition) into its fold (Beatty, 1996; Woodward, 2011). This is exemplified linguistically in the Javanese and Indonesian word *semedi,* which originated from the Indian word *samādhi* and bears the same meaning: a meditative practice. It is even believed that many Indonesian Muslim saints and sultans in the past practiced *semedi* as part of their religious proliferation effort or their attempt to harness supernatural power (Anderson, 1972).

In its modern form, the practice of *semedi* bears some semblance to the regular, weekly meditation sessions organized by many Buddhist monasteries, in which participants are expected to sit silently for a specific period to observe the inner working of the self. Especially in the Indonesian urban areas where these meditation trainings are thriving (Rizzo, 2024), one

can further surmise that the aggressive penetration of neoliberal ethos has rendered negative emotions such as anger unproductive for capitalist enterprises and, thus, initiated the need to manage those emotions through practices like meditation (Simchai & Shoshana, 2018). Our casual observation also suggests that not all attendees in these sessions are Buddhists. The most apparent hint to support this observation is the presence of women wearing the hijab during the sessions. We mention this not in order to essentialize Islam (Alvi, 2013; Topal, 2017); our point is simply that these individuals are non-Buddhists who consciously practice a Buddhist tradition. This intriguing fact, in turn, leads to the obvious question of *why*.

Through an ethnographic study between 2023 and 2024, this article explores the understanding and utilization of *vipassana* meditation among the regular Muslim attendees of weekly meditation classes in Teratai Kasih Monastery, Semarang, Central Java.[1] Over seven months, we became regular presences in the monastery's main hall every Wednesday evening, usually slipping into the back row to observe how fellow meditators strove to stay quiet in cross-legged postures for one hour (7:00–8:00 p.m.). Early in the fieldwork, we were struck by a simple realization: meditation only appears serene when viewed at a distance, not when we attempted to do it ourselves. Our initial project, shaped by the first author's long-term interest in Chinese Indonesian religiosity, presumed the monastery to be a straightforward entry point into Chinese Buddhist ethical life. Yet the sight of attendees wearing hijab, alongside others whose facial appearance was clearly non-Chinese, unsettled this plan. Their steady, week-after-week presence drew our attention toward a different question: What brings non-Buddhists to a distinctly Buddhist practice, and what meanings do they make of it? Rapport was built less through formal queries than through informal conversations before and after the class. These exchanges gradually formed our understanding of how non-Buddhists make sense of *vipassana*.

The literature on meditation in the past decade has productively explored the beneficial aspects of this practice, particularly its more widely-known role in therapeutic pursuit (Myers et al., 2015; Pagis, 2019). Nonetheless, studies on the role of *vipassana* meditation in reconceiving non-Buddhist religious identity are hitherto underexplored, except for the relationship between meditation and Jewish religious identity (Mautner, 2022; Mautner & Mizrachi, 2020; Seeman & Carlin, 2019). Working in the Indonesian context, we examine the role of meditation in reconceptualizing one's sense of being a good Muslim. In contrast to, for instance, Mautner's (2022) finding that meditation must first be decoupled from its Buddhist origins and then infused with Jewishness before Orthodox Jews can accept it, our interlocutors never have the need to search for the Muslim origin of this practice. Meditation is part of what many of our non-Buddhist interlocutors referred to as *pencarian* [search] or *perjalanan spiritual* [spiritual journey] (in contrast, none of the Buddhists we encountered in the monastery described *vipassana* in this manner). The alienness or otherness of meditation is tolerated, and even embraced, as long as its doctrinal-theological features are deliberately set aside.

Our objective is to present a narrative account of the roles played by meditation in navigating individuals' spiritual experiences (i.e., existential crises related to anxiety, fear, doubt,

[1] Founded on January 1, 1965, Teratai Kasih is one of the main monasteries in Semarang, the capital of Central Java province. The meditation classes held regularly for the general public at this monastery are part of the program to highlight and showcase its appreciation of diversity, which concurs with Indonesia's national motto of 'unity in diversity'. In fact, Teratai Kasih was named the winner of the 2023 House of Worship for Religious Moderation, a competition sponsored by the Research and Development division of the Indonesian Ministry of Religion, which aims to promote religious harmony and moderation. In this article, Teratai Kasih is a pseudonym.

and the search for ultimate solutions) within their religious context (i.e., being a Muslim). In the first and second sections of the article, we present a more detailed discussion of the existing studies of meditation that were briefly mentioned above, as well as the ways meditation are generally perceived in Indonesia, which contributes to its receptivity among non-Buddhists. The last two sections introduce Zahir[2] and his narrative account of practicing meditation, as well as his understanding of how this practice relates to his religious conception as a practicing Muslim.

In the case of meditation practitioners in the U.S., Myers et al. (2015) list three interconnected themes that underlie the perception of mindful meditation as therapeutic: it enables the shifting of focus from traumatic memories to the lived present moment, it makes pain more acceptable to individuals, and it demonstrates that individuals' burden and pressure to project their ideal selves are not necessarily valid when viewed in silence. Focusing on the Islamic practice of *salat* and the way it connects to these three meditation-related themes, we argue that the diversity of meanings, interpretations, and ways of relating to God embedded in *salat* (Haeri, 2013; Henkel, 2005; Mahmood, 2001) is best exemplified in the narrative context of an individual's spiritual experience. Although Zahir's story is not the story of trauma and its recovery, we found the three themes useful in framing the recurring focal points in his narratives. Moreover, as will be detailed further below, the three themes also serve as a sort of connecting threads that gives Zahir's accounts a temporary coherence and the way to work through the uncertainties of everyday life; in short, the purpose is not to "present objective, comprehensive accounts of events but rather perspectives on events" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 45).

In focusing on one individual's effort to become a better person, we are inspired by Das's (2010) notion of moral striving, that is, an ethical action "not premised on an objectively agreed upon idea of the common good" nor pertaining to "what kind of virtues can be named and how they relate to an Islamic teleology" (p. 233) but, rather, one that strives for the ethical by putting the self in constant meaning-making negotiation with the everyday. Needless to say, Zahir's life does not necessarily represent or reflect the general understanding of Buddhist meditation among Muslim meditators. However, to further quote Das (2010), Zahir's singularity might potentially "articulat[e] a position that allows various new possibilities to emerge" (p. 250). In this case, it is the possibility of occupying a subject position that transcends the usual binary of traditionalist-versus-reformist in the discussion of Indonesian Muslims (Sila, 2021). Humphrey (2008) has also urged us to pay attention to the originality of a particular person's life in a given situation, that is, "to think about how a singular human being might put him or herself together as a distinctive subject … through the very process of taking action" (p. 358). Such distinctiveness, we contend, cannot be adequately encapsulated in collective terms that signify membership, however loose or flexible, in a particular movement or group. The 14 interlocutors, including Zahir, in our study, for sure, did not view themselves as part of any movement. Our objective is simply to argue for the existence of a "conscious, reflexive ethical mode" in the individuals' personally-oriented 'ethical improvement" (Kloos, 2018, p. 11). For them, engaging in meditation constitutes one way to consciously fashion oneself in accordance with the image of an ideal Muslim. In other words, we wish to argue that for some people, a good meditator makes a good Muslim.

[2] Zahir is a pseudonym we use to conceal our interlocutor's identity. We also modify some identifying details to further protect his anonymity.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MEDITATION

In this section, we examine some key findings from the literature on meditation as an entry point to our study among Muslim meditation practitioners. Rather than presenting a comprehensive survey, our objective is to reflect on the work of selected scholars and juxtapose the shared themes. It should be noted, however, that the term *meditation* employed here refers exclusively to a particular practice of sitting quietly in a distinctive posture without doing anything except observing attentively one's flow of breath and mind, or to a meditative technique that serves not to direct exclusive attention to God or any Godly qualities in a constant remembrance, but, instead, to let the self and the mind be.

This, in turn, means that Islamic meditative traditions such as *dzikir* [repeatedly reciting Holy verses] in Sufism (Applebaum, 2023) are beyond the scope of this brief review. This also means that the Indonesian Muslims we study are not entirely unfamiliar with meditative tradition, for the role of Sufism in the Indonesian Islamic revival has been well-documented (Howell, 2001). Moreover, although it has been noted that Sufism has had a significant historical influence in Indonesia over the past century, a concurrent trend has emerged toward scripturalist Islamic modernist movements. Most notable among these is the exclusivist tendency of Salafism to condemn Sufi practices (Howell, 2012; Rinaldo, 2021). This, we suggest, is where the potential misalignment between meditation and religion in Indonesian Islam comes from, a sort of tension between pragmatic (i.e., for scripturalist Muslims, it means relying on religion in the form of texts to solve any problem) and spiritual (i.e., for spiritualist Muslims, it means searching for and finding God anywhere imaginable) approaches to Islam. In this article, we showcase that Zahir's meditation practice serves to ease the tension between these two approaches.

One of the pioneering ethnographic studies of *vipassana* meditation was conducted by Michal Pagis (2010). Bringing the phenomenological approach into conversation with this Buddhist practice, she incorporates the theme of silence to argue that intersubjectivity is present even in the seemingly individual act of meditating, in which individuals consciously shut off their explicit communication with the outside world, either by closing their eyes or by focusing their sensory attention inward. This, in effect, is an argument that silent meditation done collectively in a meditation hall is necessarily social since the individuals involved respond intersubjectively to whatever happens during a session. For instance, non-movement by some individuals is viewed by others as "an indicator of good meditation and seniority," while the slightest movement might "cluster and form bundles of noise" (Pagis, 2010, p. 318) in a contagious manner, such as when one singular case of coughing was taken as a tacit permission by others to follow the lead. This also means that, regardless of individual motivation, it is the intersubjective observing of the silence of others that mainly reinforces each other to be silent during meditation.

Most would agree that finding a cheaper and less dangerous, and possibly more promising, alternative to the weekly appointments with a psychiatrist or chemical medications is good news. However, meditation's spiritual origin in the Indian tradition poses a doctrinal challenge for some individuals with strict conceptions of religious life. Sitting quietly while observing the flow of one's breath might be relaxing or even healthy, but does it conform to God's Law? This is the question faced by the Hasidic Jews, one that is concerned about the way to formulate a *kosher* meditation. Attempting to introduce a popular understanding of Hasidic teachings while simultaneously maintaining clear "secular-religious and Judaism-idolatry binaries," Hasidic Jews carefully and selectively appropriate the mindfulness discourse, knowing full well that

such discourse is carrying "heavy cosmological burdens that must be negotiated or neutralized in the process of being 'made *kosher*'" (Seeman & Karlin, 2019, pp. 56-57).

A similar conclusion is drawn from Mautner and Mizrachi's (2020) study on Orthodox Jews in Israel who belong to a group called Jewish Vipassana. They argue that how these meditation practitioners incorporate elements of Buddhist values into their religious beliefs showcases that openness to otherness might not always entail a cosmopolitan worldview. Moreover, by revising the history of Buddhist meditation through claims that such practice was prevalent in the ancient periods of the Hebrew prophets (thus explaining their intimate relationship with God), these Orthodox Jews genuinely feel that they are simply following the virtuous examples of God's chosen prophets (Mautner & Mizrachi, 2020). In a more recent article, Mautner shifts the thematic focus to the implications of secularization for ethical projects, arguing that the depiction of *vipassana* meditation among the Orthodox Jews as "universal and religiously neutral" amounts to the project of secularization, which he defines as "the distinction of any aspect of life from 'religion'" (Mautner, 2022, pp. 1271-1272). This project is, in turn, religiously ethical because the neutralized *vipassana* helps the Orthodox Jews to envision and redefine their relationships with God as well as their purpose in life.

Furthermore, although the opposite of being mindful – mindlessness – has been noted as potentially dangerous for mental health, so much so that among the Northern Thai it is "understood as a culturally salient mark of distress" (Cassaniti, 2019, p. 697), an adverse side effect of mindfulness meditation does not go unnoticed. Based on multi-site ethnographic studies of several Israeli spiritual groups, for instance, Simchai & Shoshana (2018) argue that while spiritual practices like meditation might be beneficial in overcoming negative emotions derived from traumatic pasts, they run the risk of turning individuals into apolitical subjects. Focusing their argument on the emotion of anger, they note that discourses such as emotional intelligence implicitly urge individuals to view any reactive response, even in the face of injustice and discrimination, as harmful or inappropriate. Such discourses, they continue, are closely entwined with the neo-liberal discourse that "promotes a productive, efficient, industrious, optimistic, and above all an apolitical subjectivity … [and] encourages individuals to turn inward to their psyche and to distance themselves from protest and anger" (Simchai & Shoshana, 2018, p. 131).

Building on the burgeoning literature on meditation, the following sections explore how a foreign spiritual practice originating from the Buddhist tradition is understood and utilized to reconceptualize the ideal of a good Muslim and to make sense of everyday life as a practicing Muslim. By foregrounding a focus on Muslim subjectivity, we wish to complement the anthropological literature on Indonesian Buddhism by paying attention not only to the ethical strivings of the Buddhists (Khu, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c) but also to non-Buddhists engaging with Buddhist practices.

MEDITATION AS A CULTURAL AND SCIENTIFIC PRACTICE

How do Muslim meditation practitioners in Teratai Kasih Monastery reconcile their sense of religious identity with a Buddhist practice they diligently engage in? This is not a trivial question, for Menchik (2017) has argued that Indonesia follows a distinctive style of democracy, which he terms "tolerance without liberalism". In short, it means that freedom of (in this case, religious) expression is guaranteed insofar as certain 'ungodly' elements are constantly excluded and otherized to maintain the sense of the previously established imagined community. In other words, it means that in a Muslim-majority country like Indonesia, there is an urge to define, rather strictly, what constitutes a religious tradition, which in turn is determined by how a tradition conforms to the Abrahamic conceptions held by Islam, one of which is that any

religious tradition must have a belief in God Almighty. This explains why non-monotheistic traditions like Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism must first formulate a newly found conception of God in order to make their metaphysical worldviews palatable to the government's religious sensibility and to acquire the title of official religion in Indonesia (Abalahin, 2005; Brown, 2004; McDaniel, 2013). To quote Wessing (2016), this is "the state's monopoly on the definition of what does or does not constitute a religion, shaping religious truth by setting the parameters within which this truth is defined" (p. 358).

This view, at first glance, might be at odds with another important view that is enshrined in the national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* [unity in diversity], which, in its daily application, does not only celebrate diversity in the abstract sense of the word but also strives to embrace it in practice. The tension between maintaining the purity of faith and embracing the elements of otherness is resolved ingeniously through the distinction between *kebudayaan* [culture] and *agama* [religion] (Woodward, 2011; see also Wessing, 2016). In general, *kebudayaan* refers to those ways of life stripped of any theological nuances and relegated to a sort of commodity or formality, and, as such, are presentable as a legitimately neutral and secularized practice. Although it is undoubtedly true that some ethnic groups in Indonesia do not view culture and religion as two separate matters, most notably the people of Aceh, West Sumatra, or Bali, studies have found that whenever certain practices or rituals run the risk of being perceived as opposed to religion, the convenient disclaimer is to portray such practices or rituals (e.g., the popular *Jathilan* horse dance) in question as *culture* (see, for instance, Christensen, 2014; Rodemeier, 2014). In this sense, a particular practice is allowed to continue (for no one will contest that culture should be preserved) without being viewed as antithetical to religion.

The ten-year period of Joko Widodo's presidency (2014–2024) has witnessed such a commodification or formalization process, during which the president was often dressed up in traditional clothes from various ethnic groups in the archipelago in many public events, as if to emphasize that being a Javanese ethnically does not necessarily preclude him from embracing the way of life of other ethnicities. In other words, what we see is a culture that "is largely reduced to a set of constructed (mostly aesthetic) particles and objects, a few rituals, songs, and pieces of clothing" (Haynes & Hickel, 2018, p. 12), or "culture in quote marks," that is, as something that has much to do with representational identity and a consequent investment in its 'preservation'" (Vilaça, 2014, p. S323).

During our fieldwork in Teratai Kasih Monastery, we discovered a similar cultural logic, but without the commodification process. Our interlocutors have no qualms about practicing meditation, as they view it as part of Buddhist culture, rather than Buddhist doctrine or theology. One interlocutor, for instance, talked about "*memetik inspirasi dari kebudayaan Buddhis* [taking inspiration from the Buddhist culture]" when discussing *vipassana*. When asked to elaborate on how she differentiates the cultural from the religious in Buddhism, she replied that "religion is your way of communicating with God, while culture is your way of living daily life" (field interview, 13 December 2023). Ascertaining that there is no reference to any supernatural deity in *vipassana*, she concluded that the practice is cultural.

Another way of viewing the culturalization of Buddhism is to argue that it reduces Buddhism to culture altogether. During our fieldwork, once we met a Buddhist who, after proudly mentioning the gift of meditation technique that Buddhism offers to humanity, lamented how Buddhism is currently misperceived in Indonesia. He asked us to see for ourselves how the Borobudur temple is treated by visitors "merely as an object of tourist attraction, just like the Pyramid in Egypt … Can you imagine the Kaaba being treated in the same irreverent way?!" (field interview, 20 March 2024). Complaining about people casually sitting on the holy stupa

to take selfies, he asserted that it is not enough to see Borobudur as a civilizational achievement, for in its essence, it is a place of Buddhist worship. On a similar note, Rizzo (2024) has implied that whenever the Hindu-Buddhist trope is invoked in Indonesia, it is with an implicit reference to traces of past heritage rather than an actual, living religious tradition.

To offer a better understanding of this cultural logic, it will be instructive to consider a broader context. For years in Indonesia, there has been a debate concerning the appropriateness of Muslims conveying religious greetings to their fellow non-Muslims, for instance, by saying Namo Buddhaya to Buddhists or Shalom to Christians. In 2024, Majelis Ulama Indonesia [Indonesian Ulema Council] has issued a fatwa stating that it is haram for Muslims to do so[3]; on the other hand, such practice gradually found its justification during Joko Widodo's presidency: many government officials, following the president's cue, always started their speeches by conveying the religious greetings of the six official religions in Indonesia one by one,[4] instead of simply the usual Assalamualaikum. We found that for our interlocutors, there were also no qualms about greeting others religiously according to their respective traditions. The main reason given is that this act, to reiterate the point, should be viewed as a cultural act. To quote one of their comments, "the interfaith greeting is okay because it is an Indonesian culture to express *kesopanan* [courtesy] and *keramah-tamahan* [hospitality] to others, regardless of who they are" (field interview, 17 January 2024).

Among Muslim meditation practitioners in Teratai Kasih monastery who were generous enough to share their accounts with us, most are undergraduate students pursuing higher education in Semarang. Some are residents, but more than half come from the surrounding cities and towns. Although virtually all of them identify themselves as practicing Muslims who believe that the Holy Quran contains all the answers to their problems (this is in contrast to, say, being a Muslim on paper only, which has its popular term in Indonesia: *Muslim KTP,* or, *ID Card Muslim*), some admitted that, at times, personal problems seem to pose no immediate solution, and even religion itself appears to offer no respite. They blamed themselves for this shortcoming, either their weak understanding of religion or the stubbornness of their heart, which in turn points to the theme of the everyday/ordinary within the anthropology of Islam with its emphasis on religious ambiguity, doubt, uncertainty, or, in short, those affective states that run counter to the essentialized view of religious persons as zealous or full of conviction (Fadil & Fernando, 2015; Schielke & Debevec, 2012). Sincerely believing that Islam provides the solutions for all existential problems but, at the same time, finding themselves face-to-face with daily uncertainties, they resort to meditation.

Zahir, whose account will be presented in more detail below, mentioned the practical appeal of meditation as what initially drew him to meditate regularly. He then compared the practicality of "this Buddhist technique" with what he described as "the mysterious poetics of the Quran," before adding that "in the Holy Book you could certainly find all kinds of truth, but they are deeply hidden in layers of profound verses." All the stories he had heard about the benefits of meditation, especially the news of its scientific verifiability widely circulated among monastery attendees, made him even more certain that meditation was worth trying. He admitted that his parents were unaware of his regular activities in the monastery. "If they know, the first thing that will cross their minds is that their son already converted to Buddhism!" said Zahir,

[3] The *fatwa* was formulated after four days of deliberation (28-31 May) in the following ruling: Keputusan Ijtima' Ulama Komisi Fatwa se-Indonesia VIII Nomor 02/Ijtima' Ulama/VIII/2024.

[4] The six official religions in Indonesia are Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

chuckling. But for him, practicing "a scientifically-tested practice" like meditation (he believed this to be so because, in his words, "I have conducted my own research on the Internet and found out that many Ivy League universities do have special laboratories for studying meditators") is not as simplistic as converting from one religion to another.

One might argue that the emergence of scientifically-minded Indonesian Muslims, in part, originated with the establishment of Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia [Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals] in 1990, with former President and, at that time, Minister of Research and Technology B. J. Habibie serving as national chair. ICMI gained the support of Suharto's New Order regime because its rhetoric centered not on religion, but on manpower development grounded in technical and scientific education. Such is the vision of modern Indonesian Muslims – Western-educated, rational, and scientifically minded – that the regime envisioned its subjects to be (Liddle, 1996). Howell (2005) further notes that the appeal of New Age movements among Indonesian Muslims is closely related to how urban publics are introduced to a "partly scientized notion of 'spirituality'" (p. 476) that equips spiritual practices with scientific legitimation. In Zahir's case, YouTube videos on the science of meditation from what he deemed reputable channels – ABC Science, Talks at Google, Scientific American, University of California Television, Harvard University, and Oxford Mindfulness – offer him technical and scientific vocabularies whereby truth is not confined to particular religious terms or verses. In fact, in one of our interviews, he talked about the embarrassment he felt towards "those people who crudely copy-and-paste Quranic verses into scientific arguments to make their case." These people (the name Harun Yahya was referenced more than once), for Zahir, has made Islam a source of ridicule among non-Muslims because "the more they tried to show that all scientific truths are contained literally within the Quranic verses, the more they turn Islam into a *cocoklogi* [a popular Indonesian term referring to confirmation bias; *cocok* means match or fit, and *logi* means -logy, as in anthropo-logy]." His uneasiness concerning the tendency among some Muslims to practice *cocoklogi* reveals, we suggest, a more general uneasiness among Indonesian Muslims confronted with the fact of having to live together in ethnoreligious difference (and, thus, of having to maintain a positive self-image constantly), and betrays the tension within what Hefner (2020) terms "covenantal pluralism".

For Zahir, science is universal and cannot be constrained to a particular religious tradition. That is why a true Muslim, he remarked, should celebrate the life of Muslim scientists like Ibn Rushd (Averroes) or Ibn Sina (Avicenna): "You know, Europeans read their works passionately. The Europeans were greatly inspired, not because these scholars are Muslims but because they wrote about objective truth, and this truth is the same everywhere and in any language." Then, he added: "Similarly, while it may be the Indian who discovered the breathing meditation technique, the truth of it still belongs solely to God." We interpret his statements to mean that anything empirically proven necessarily belongs to the natural world, and this world is, for all believers, unmistakably the domain of God, for it is God who created the world in the first place; therefore, one may conclude that Buddhist meditation owes its popularity partly to the scientific aura that it acquires through its contact with academic institutions of the Euro-American world (McMahan & Braun, 2017; Presti, 2021; Wallace, 2003).

APPROACHING GOD BY ENTERING ONE'S MIND

Zahir's story is a tale of survival during the COVID-19 pandemic and the slow recovery that followed. As the oldest child in a pious Muslim family, he went through childhood and adolescence in what he described as a "good educational environment," with a nice balance between religion and worldly entertainment. This means that although he is expected to perform Islamic

practices such as the five obligatory daily prayers (*salat*), his parents did not forbid him from, say, listening to Western music. In fact, he emphasized this latter point during our conversation, for he knew that some people consider such music *haram.* It is as if he wanted to make sure that we, as his listeners, could draw an accurate picture of what he meant by the word *pious* and, in turn, contrast it with other words like, say, *radical* or *conservative*.

Zahir never considered himself as having or suffering from mental health problems. His twelve years of compulsory education in school passed by smoothly, although not in the strict academic sense, for he was just an average student, "not the class topper, but certainly not at all stupid." After he enrolled in university, things initially appeared to stay the same. Then came the pandemic. He remembered that the first three months of 2020 were filled with confusion. News from around the world continued to report the seriousness of the pandemic, while those around him acted as if nothing was happening. Even government officials initially tried to underestimate the seriousness of COVID-19 in a somewhat dismissive way, saying things like, in Zahir's reminiscence, "the sheer power of prayer will repel COVID-19!" Time slowly proved that the whole situation was not to be taken lightly. The death toll kept increasing and, finally, the government imposed a lockdown. Campus activities were suspended, while all lectures were to be attended online. Trapped inside his flat room, he found no one to interact with and no possibility of going home. His family lives far to the west of Semarang, an eight-hour journey by train, but at that time, all public transportations were halted, and even after the official restriction was loosened (accompanied by the jargon social distancing), Zahir was still too terrified to mingle with other people publicly. He gradually started to feel depressed. In his words: "That was my first experience with *depresi* [depression]. I used to wonder what it's like to be depressed. During the pandemic, I finally got a real taste of it."

We asked him what he meant by "a real taste" of depression, and Zahir summarized it in a few words: "the complete emptiness inside yourself." He felt disoriented, not knowing what to do, lagging in his studies, and started binge-watching the series on Netflix and YouTube in a desperate effort to keep his mind out of that depressed emptiness. But this came to no avail. Now, instead of just feeling empty, a sense of tiredness, mental and physical, emerged. It was around this period, approximately nine months after the initial depression, that he started to hear strange voices, or what his psychiatrist later described to him as auditory verbal hallucinations. Considering the Indonesian cultural context in which such voices might be interpreted supernaturally, we asked whether he ever thought of them as a ghostly disturbance, as a case of *ketempelan* or *diikuti makhluk halus* [being attached to or followed by supernatural beings] However, Zahir quickly brushed the suggestion aside, saying that one should not look for a far-fetched answer if a more plausible one exists. In his case, he continued: "First there was a depression, and then there were voices inside my head. It's a simple causality. So, there's no need for ghosts to enter the conversation."

During this period, he never forgot to perform his *salat,* secretly hoping that the daily prayers would be efficacious enough to stop him from hearing those voices. But unfortunately, that turned out not to be the case. Basically, according to him, there were two types of those strange voices. The first was a screeching sound that reminded him of "some nocturnal animals … probably bats." The second one was a gentle whisper that called his name, "Zahir … Zahir …" He realized that these hallucinations were really serious when, one evening, while performing *salat* in his room*,* he heard a female voice calling his name from behind. There was, however, no one when he turned his head.

Feeling that he could not confide in his parents about what he was going through (they were the first to suggest that he see a psychiatrist, and at the same time kept reminding him to

surrender to God), he confessed his ordeal to one of his close friends, who recommended the practice of meditation. The friend told him he knew a place that regularly holds meditation sessions every week. Years ago, this friend had tried going there to meditate a couple of times but admitted that sitting quietly with folded legs was not his cup of tea, before adding: "But who knows, maybe you can get some benefit." In 2022, after diligently browsing all the information he could find about meditation on the internet (including its reputedly scientific basis), Zahir decided to visit the place his friend told him, Teratai Kasih Monastery. He made his first visit on a Wednesday evening in March. Sitting alongside dozens of other attendees in the meditation hall, his initial experience of meditating is that of "feeling sore in my joints, feeling numb across my legs, and the mind that kept wandering." After one hour of "torturing myself" like that, he started thinking that maybe, just like his friend, meditation was not his cup of tea. Fortunately, one of the attendees approached him after the session and asked what he felt during meditation. Zahir listed all his complaints, but the old lady just smiled and said: "Don't worry. These happened to all first-timers. Do come again next time. It will get better, I promise."

Zahir returned to meditate several times afterwards, but still found himself unable to concentrate or experience the inner peace that meditation promised. Gradually, around the sixth or seventh attempt, he began to feel what had previously been only theoretical or hearsay. In his words: "When I focused my whole attention on the flow of my breath, persistent but without being stubborn about it, then I started to see what's inside my mind more clearly." This means that the usual frustration he felt whenever the intended focus on breath shifted involuntarily to other things, such as the faint sound of a car honking outside, was not perceived as a failure on his part, but simply as "things happening as they are." This new experience gave him a sense of comfort, of being worry-free. Finding this to be at least a positive effect, a respite from the news of medical staff collapsing because of overwork and people passing away due to a lack of appropriate treatment, he continued his meditation regularly. Around November of that same year, he had what he described as "the great discovery." He told us that by anchoring his mind on a simple object, such as his own breath, and silently observing the train of thoughts passing by incessantly, the occurrence of the voices inside his head also diminished significantly.

We were curious to hear his explanation regarding this improvement, and Zahir offered one. According to him, being mindful of his surroundings enabled him to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Focusing attention on the coming and going of breaths is synonymous with decluttering the mind, for it forces him to recognize the most basic activity of any living being: "Breathing is a matter of life and death, but it is so natural that we always take it for granted. That's why, more often than not, we actually forget that we are breathing all the time." By appreciating the most concrete reality of his existence and building his subsequent observations on that foundation, Zahir gradually learned to recognize the other realities that occurred constantly around him. For instance, if there was a honking sound, he immediately made a mental note, "I hear this sound because there is a vehicle on the road," and if he felt an itchy sensation on his body, "I feel this because I have skin." This mental exercise helped him recognize the boundary between what is real (things whose existence can be deduced causally) and what is not (imaginary things that exist only in his mind).

Zahir told us that even at the present moment, the voices, particularly the one calling his name, still occur occasionally, though not as frequently as before. For instance, weeks before our interview session, when he was walking with friends on their way to class, he heard a female voice calling his name, but no one was present when he turned around. Attempting to explain this relapse, he did not attribute the cause to the failing of the meditative technique itself but, instead, considered the possibility that at that time, he was most probably in the state

of *melamun* [daydreaming] or *pikiran kosong* [blank thought], which is reminiscent of Cassaniti's (2019) discussion of mindlessness; that is, a state of distress marked by the lack of awareness of one's surrounding, in which a person appears to go through motions but without a clear purpose or volition. He confessed that he wished to learn how to be mindful even when one is in movement or engaging in activities, for he knew that sitting quietly is not the only way to do meditation: "Being mindful while walking, particularly among other people busying you with conversation, is indeed more difficult. But it's worth trying …"

PERFORMING *SALAT* IN THE CONTEXT OF MEDITATION

Aside from the testimony that practicing meditation has helped him cope with his mental health problems, Zahir made explicit the connection between this practice and his religious life. The way his narrative made frequent references to how meditation helped him to become a better Muslim contributes to the understanding of how the state of mindfulness opens up the space for redefining and reforging one's relationship with God or, in other words, the understanding of how ordinary life is lived as part of the grand narrative whose plots and outcomes belong exclusively to God (Fadil & Fernando, 2015; Schielke & Debevec, 2012). Zahir made it clear that the unobstructed focus on God associated with the ideal performance of *salat* occurred only after he started pairing meditation with *salat*.[5] He did this by sitting quietly in the lotus position, as often as possible, for five minutes before performing the obligatory prayer. These brief, personal meditation sessions complement the more extended, collective sessions he still frequents in Teratai Kasih at least 2-3 times a month, which can stretch to one hour of sitting silently in the hall. He felt that it was through meditation that he could finally taste what it feels like to surrender oneself to God.

This account resonates with three important anthropological studies on the practice of *salat.* Examining the role of *salat* among Turkish Muslims in Istanbul, Henkel (2005) argues that *salat* "provides practitioners with a formidable resource for strengthening their commitment to Islam and … enabling religious Muslims to pursue new and diverse interpretations of Islam" (p. 487). Observing the performance of *salat* in its private setting beyond the formal and public sphere, Haeri (2013) argues that private/personal *salat* enables the "proliferation of meanings emerging as a result of the undermining of the formality of the text by repetition" (p. 5). Mahmood (2001), in an important piece that scrutinizes *salat* through the anthropological theories of ritual, notes the "parallel conceptions of *salat*" which result from "variable relationships assigned to rule-governed behavior within different conceptions of the self under particular regimes of truth, power, and authority" (p. 827). The commonality between these three studies is their insistence that there is no single goal, interpretation, or meaning attached to *salat.* Although it is logical to state that all Muslim believers perform *salat* with more or less the same religious spirit, this does not necessarily mean that what they expect to achieve from this required practice, or even how they personally relate to God as the recipient of their prayer, will be homogeneous. For instance, Lengauer (2018), in her study of digital Islamic socialities in Bandung, describes how members of Pejuang Subuh [Dawn Fighters] encourage the collective

[5] It should be noted that from our fourteen interlocutors, only Zahir practised this pairing of meditation and salat. Nonetheless, all reported that practicing meditation helped them become more focused in daily life, whether in mundane or religious activities. In short, all reported the close, though not necessarily immediate, connection between meditation and salat.

performance of the obligatory prayer before dawn at the mosque, rather than alone at home, as a way to not only fulfil religious duty but also envision an ideal Muslim leadership.

Drawing inspiration from these scholars, we aim to describe Zahir's understanding of meditation in relation to his performance of *salat* by framing it within the three themes proposed by Myers et al. (2015). The first theme – attention to the present moment is therapeutic – is clearly present in Zahir's narrative. By learning to dwell in the *now*, instead of *then* or *later*, one can argue that he has allowed his mind to recognize and, in turn, appreciate the presentness of reality. Moreover, because this learning is not the exclusive domain of the mind, but something that is necessarily embodied or somatic (Pagis, 2010, 2019), we can see how meditation is closely related to *salat.* In Zahir's case, briefly meditating before performing *salat* enabled his mind to stay in the right attitude, that is, to position himself correctly (one might be tempted to add, empirically) amidst the entanglement of the real and not-real. Afterwards, the bodily nature of *salat* would, in turn, help him stay in the present by ensuring that the mind remained fixed, at least temporarily, during the prayer session, to its intended object (God) via the choreographic performance of *salat.* In short, heightened attention to the present moment increased his somatic awareness (Myers et al., 2015), which subsequently enhanced his cognitive awareness in a dialectical manner.

The second theme – accepting pain is therapeutic – is also present in Zahir's narrative. It is important to note that during our conversation, Zahir never once mentioned the word *pain* when recounting his hallucinatory experience. Instead, he preferred the word *menjengkelkan* [annoying] or *mengganggu* [disturbing], which indicates a sense of exasperation. Familiarizing himself with his internal state of mind greatly contributed to the transformed perception of his hallucinatory experience. Firstly, similar to his realization that empirical reality is causal, he eventually came to understand that the voices inside his head operate in the same causal logic. Particularly in the hallucinatory case of hearing his name being called, he even proposed a self-diagnosed conclusion: "I think that was my response to being so trapped in loneliness and at the same time constantly hearing people everywhere dying in vain." It will be instructive to consider that the increasing death toll directly impacted his feeling of loneliness, either in the sense of more and more people leaving him alone in this world, or the fear of his dying alone in isolation. Regardless of the validity of this self-diagnosis, it is important to note his understanding that nothing happens randomly and that everything exists for a reason. Bringing this understanding into his *salat,* the figure of God as the ultimate object of this obligatory prayer was, naturally and logically, transformed into the prime cause, in the sense that Zahir's hallucinatory experience was not only causally related to the COVID-19 pandemic but also had its ultimate origin in God. Moreover, this is precisely the justification for his doing *salat*. Whereas previously he approached God for a solution without necessarily associating the cause of the problem with Him, now he attributes both the cause and solution to a single omniscient entity, not to put the blame on God, but to realize His almightiness.[6] This, in other words, is the interplay between the pragmatic and the spiritual, where a particular problem exists not simply in order to be solved through religious means but also as a reminder of God's uninterrupted relationship with His creation. Put differently, encountering a problem and envisioning its overcoming in a religious sense means opening up a space in which a distinctively intimate way of relating to God becomes possible. It is *distinctively intimate* because a problem, even one that is globally impactful like the pandemic, is always personally and experientially felt by the individual. Thus,

[6] Here, he recited for us a verse from Surah Al-Fatiha: *Iyyaaka na'budu wa Iyyaaka nasta'een* [It is You we worship and You we ask for help] (Qur'an, 1:5, trans. Sahih International).

for Zahir, to be presented with a problem means to present religion with an opportunity to showcase its pragmatic value as well as to test the texture of one's relationship with God. Zahir's remark, a widely popular expression in Indonesia, aptly summarizes this: "Regardless of what I had been through, I know for sure that God will never test us beyond our ability to endure it."

The third theme – preferring silence over self-stories is therapeutic – is related to the first two themes. By being silent in meditation, Zahir not only managed to think causally about the real and the not-real but also gave himself some time to reflect on the burden of expectation arising from his self-stories. In his words, "after *membiasakan diri* [habituating myself] with meditation, I realized that I had previously asked too many *why* questions. Why did this or that happen, and so on, why things didn't go exactly as I planned or desired, and so on. Stuff like that." It will not be inaccurate to state that these sorts of self-stories narrowed his experience to only a specific perspective (Myers et al., 2015), namely, his egocentric perspective. Connecting this confession to his self-diagnosis concerning the cause of his loneliness, one could argue that his self-stories about, say, the normal campus life with its socializing activities had been entirely shattered by the pandemic, and, unable to accept this fact, it is possible that the subconscious reacted in such a way; in his case, by creating auditory verbal hallucinations. By being silent, at least temporarily, during meditation, he shut down those self-stories and, subsequently, by combining this silence with the performance of *salat,* he managed to free himself from such stories by attending his devotion to God and, therefore, subscribing to the ultimate story, that of God's grand design. In short, through the combination of meditation and *salat,* Zahir surrendered his egocentric story in exchange for another one in which he is not the main protagonist but simply one among the multitude of others. Again, he summarized this aptly, "God indeed works mysteriously. It's truly unfathomable … All we can do is simply surrender ourselves sincerely."

CONCLUSION

Lindahl et al. (2022) rightly point out that the acceptance of meditation as a personal practice is closely impacted by the religious, as well as scientific, worldviews held by the practitioner, especially in navigating the understanding and utilization related to it. In Zahir's case, his acceptance was prompted by the fact that his religious belief posits the almightiness of a God that necessarily governs all the operations of the natural world, in which the procedure and efficacy of *vipassana* constitute one small part. This belief is intertwined with his other conviction about the scientific basis of meditation, which serves to firmly position this practice within the *natural* (observable, empirical, verifiable) world. Last but not least, the cultural status of meditation, or how any religion-related things generally acquire their acceptability in Indonesia instead of being viewed as contradicting the dominant religious doctrine, also serves as yet another worldview in providing individuals like Zahir the tool to reconcile their meditative practice with their religious faith.

Unlike other studies of meditation that put more emphasis on its therapeutic features, either viewed positively (Myers et al., 2015) or negatively (Simchai & Shoshana, 2018), our study aims to explore the instrumental nature of meditation in "contributing to a divine plan" as in the case of Orthodox Jewish meditators (Mautner, 2022, p. 1282). However, if Jewish meditation practitioners have the obligatory urge to make meditation *kosher*, either by stripping it of its religious affiliation with Buddhism or by telling revisionist historical accounts of ancient Hebrew prophets practicing meditations, Zahir's case presents a different finding. Firstly, he practices his meditation inside a Buddhist monastery, in front of a large statue of the Buddha. Though it goes without saying that he did not attach any significance to this statue, the point is

that he did not consider it necessary to detach his practice from its religious affiliation. Secondly, there was also no need for Zahir to formulate a revisionist account concerning meditation. This latter point is worth elaborating further because, in the last decade in Indonesia, several books have been circulating with the proposal that Indonesia has always been a Muslim nation since ancient times. The most popular book of this kind, which at one time even became a national bestseller and which its author claimed was based on three decades of meticulous study, posits that the famous Borobudur temple was built by Solomon![7] On the other hand, Zahir knew that his meditative practice originated from India, but since this technique can be subjected to scientific observation, he classified it as belonging to the natural world, that is, the rightful domain of God Almighty as the sole creator of the universe. In this sense, we find a similar act of dissociating meditation from its Indian origin, particularly the soteriological purpose of attaining enlightenment, as in the case among Jewish Vipassana meditators, but both dissociations differ in their details and procedures, which further proves the importance of seeing meditation in the narrative context of its practitioners.

Lastly, regarding his eclectic act of combining meditation and *salat,* the most straightforward answer might be to describe this as a sort of New Age attitude. But Zahir himself rejected being termed a New Age follower. In fact, he held great suspicion to what he called *keyakinan campur-campur* [randomly mixed belief].[8] A better answer, we believe, might be found if we, first of all, give up the insistence on studying the lived, daily experience of everyday Muslims formalistically; that is, rather than attempting to match the concrete practices of individuals with textual injunctions, our anthropological endeavor might prove more fruitful if we focus instead on what actually happens in the field. As Schielke (2010) has put it, there is "too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam" (p. 2). Put simply, seeing an apparent contradiction, like Zahir's combination of Buddhist and Muslim practices, not as something to be resolved doctrinally by textual experts, but as perhaps something that is the outcome of an existential journey, will better serve our understanding of lived religious life.

Indonesia's nation-building policy, since Sukarno, has emphasized culture as part of national identity, encapsulated in the slogan Trisakti – political sovereignty, economic self-reliance, and *berkepribadian dalam kebudayaan* [possessing personality in culture] (Bhardwaj, 2024). In the last decade, particularly, one witnesses the reification of culture detached from localized beliefs. For instance, civil servants, like the authors of this article, are required by the state to wear traditional clothes from any ethnic group in the archipelago several times a year (the commemoration of Independence Day being one of them), the purpose of which is to ostensibly celebrate the rich diversity of the nation's cultural heritage. In this sense, culture is aestheticized and theatricalized, and thus devoid of context-specific meaning-making values. For meditation practitioners like Zahir, too, *vipassana* is viewed as a part of Buddhist culture (a practical way of life) rather than Buddhist belief (a worldview concerning soteriology or eschatology). By situating and defining Buddhist meditation as cultural, an otherness can be celebrated (and the nation-building project can be ideally upheld) without compromising one's doctrinal faith. Furthermore, by attempting to make sense of *vipassana* scientifically, individuals like Zahir have striven to embody a vision of modern, well-educated Muslims who do not

[7] The book in question is titled *Borobudur dan Peninggalan Nabi Sulaiman* [Borobudur and the Legacy of Prophet Solomon]. The author, Fahmi Basya, is a lecturer at one of the State Islamic Universities in Indonesia.

[8] For a detailed account of the emergence of religiously pluralist organizations in Indonesia, which brings the New Age movement to mind, see Howell (2005).

fall easily into the binary of religion-versus-science. For them, science is part of religion, a means of proving the veracity of religion (for instance, the almightiness of God) through an agreed-upon, universal language that appeals to people who are willing to follow similar procedures.

Zahir's effort to reconcile the Buddhist meditation practice with his Islamic identity tells the familiar story of contestation and accommodation found in many insightful studies of Indonesian Islam. For instance, Sila (2021) notes that in Bima, Sumbawa, cultural diversity is embraced to the extent that it corresponds to the broad spectrum of Islamic religiosity. As noted correctly by this and other authors (see, for instance, Liddle, 1996), the highly diverse Islamic expressions cannot be neatly encapsulated by the simple binary of traditionalists versus reformists. As we have attempted to demonstrate in this article, Zahir's case offers the possibility of reconciling a non-Islamic practice with one's Islamic identity without appropriating the former to the latter. *Vipassana*, for him, coexists with Islam, rather than being absorbed into its theological framework, by virtue of its status as part of both the cultural and scientific spheres. It is deemed theologically harmless because it does not contain any specific doctrinal allegiance and, as such, can be embraced freely and neutrally, either as the celebration of the non-Islamic (but not anti-Islamic) practical way of life or as part of the God-created natural world.

Zahir's singular life story and worldview, in a sense, encompass both the traditionalist-culturalist and modernist-reformist elements of Indonesian Islam. His narratives, we believe, pave an alternative way of viewing Muslim subjectivity in Indonesia and elsewhere. These subjective narratives do not merely serve as a presentation of an intimate portrait but also, more importantly, as a zooming in on how diverse religious practices are imagined in co-existence within what could be termed commensurate difference; that is, difference is not simply tolerated for the sake of top-down imposed ideal of interreligious harmony but also embraced due to the existence of shared vocabularies (culture and science) that enable comparison. Focusing on life story, therefore, allows us to make sense of how individuals strive to imagine the appropriate way to relate to religious otherness and, consequently, to forge ethical relations with the latter. It also allows us to see how dramatic socio-historical changes, such as the 2020-2021 pandemic, shape the kinds of ethical work on the self individuals strive to pursue. It is, in the wise words of Kleinman (2006), a striving against "the insecurity of moral life and the terrible inadequacy of our usual fumbling efforts to change or fully comprehend who we are and where our world is taking us" (p. 26).

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