



Close Your Eyes and Relax: Secularizing Meditative Practice among Indonesian Non-Buddhist Youths

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Abstract. The way each person deals with problems in his or her life certainly varies, but in this era of neoliberalism, there is a tendency for individuals to rely on their own abilities, for example through self-care activities. Holding on to religion, which is a traditional product, is not an impossibility in modern times. For example, the practice of meditation, which is one of the Buddhist spiritual practices, has also been adopted as a therapeutic method by the general public, including non-Buddhist youth groups. This research then tries to explore how the secularization process occurs in the practice of meditation among these young people without any compromise with the religious practices they believe in. Using a phenomenological approach, each individual's meditation experience is described subtly to find out how the dynamics of emotions and various intersections that arise when practicing meditation by detaching the religious side of meditation. The research findings show that the transition from sacred to profane in the practice of meditation proves that the universalization of religious practices provides opportunities for the general public to adopt religious teachings, even integrating their values into other religious practices, in order to survive and maintain wellness amid the onslaught of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Meditation, Buddhism, Secularization, Neoliberalism, Self-care.

1 Introduction

Living in the era of neoliberalism is a double-edged sword: on one hand, we have the advantages of the latest technological innovations, but on the other hand, these improvements have a significant impact on our social lives, both collectively and individually. In general, neoliberalism has been shown to have a major impact on individual well-being due to heightened social competition and individualism, which can lead to increased loneliness and decreased social trust [1]. This phenomenon is further emphasized through Fraser's [4] opinion that neoliberalism has caused a crisis of care, where the responsibility of care work has been transferred to families and communities, thus exacerbating the burden on individuals and society. The nowadays lifestyle has given rise to a fast-paced behavior characterized by competition, pressure, and hustle and bustle that contributes to the way individuals live their daily lives, forgetting that life is not just about existence but also living [12]. Although current

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economic growth in some places seems to be increasing, it does not correlate with the level of happiness as there are some phenomena of escalating suicidal thoughts [3].

The phenomenon of significant changes in life dynamics does not only occur among adults or the working class, but also impacts young people. For example, in education, neoliberal education policies often emphasize individual achievement and competition, which can lead to increased stress and anxiety among students, as well as a lack of collective action and social responsibility [2]. With a homogenized curriculum and the suppression of different perspectives and opinions, education is no longer a platform for critical thinking. The neoliberal influence in education has led to the depoliticization of education that designs every student to be work-ready, instead of being sensitive to social issues and environmental problems happening around them [6]. When we understand that no one can be free from the entrapment of neoliberalism, we can imagine that the tensions that occur in a family become inevitable because every family member has similar problems, both young and old. Everyone is now looking for the suitable survival method to create a little peace for themselves in various forms of therapy, with most preferring external help from experts (e.g. psychologists), but there are also those who are more fulfilled in empowering their internal abilities such as through meditation.

This article attempts to explore how meditation, which is associated with Buddhism, became a self-care option for some Diponegoro University students as the group we studied. This is important to explore because practicing self-care requires a very strong drive from within the individual and also the practice of meditation is not an activity commonly found in the religious practices of the majority of Muslim Indonesians. Therefore, the focus of the research will center on how the process of secularization of meditation practices for Diponegoro University students who choose meditation as a way to maintain their mental health and what kind of negotiations are made over the potential friction of two religious traditions that arise when doing meditation.

2 Methods

This research was conducted using qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach. This approach is used to capture the substance of the phenomenon to be studied by investigating the daily experiences of individuals. As a result, researchers will gain a deeper insight and can also marginalize existing prejudices [10] and this is perfectly applied in the exploration of a deeply personal meditation experience. On the other hand, this research also uses in-depth interviews with several interlocutors who have been screened from a total of 18 people who have filled out the research survey with an age range of 19-22 years. As phenomenology requires the researcher to build a small data set, in-depth interviews were conducted on a limited basis so that the

knowledge of each individual's experience could be described in a structured manner, from motivation to action that was generated as an output. Nevertheless, the survey results are still useful as a general database to capture the patterns that occur among students who practice meditation.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Meditation Practice in General

Meditation is a practice which is synonymous with relaxation in silence to empty the mind. Some people often think twice about meditating because being able to focus on emptying the mind is challenging. In reality, meditation never applies a certain standard, and certainly not with the aim of emptying the mind. When referring to the basis of Buddhism, meditation is aimed at achieving mindfulness in order to understand the transience of the self [13] and then return to the awareness of existing reality, which is often referred to as *vipassana* meditation practice. The practice of *vipassana* aims to make individuals realize that there is nothing immortal (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and impermanence (*anatta*) [8]. The ultimate goal of *vipassana* for Buddhists is *nibbana*, which is the cessation of suffering and full enlightenment by renouncing everything worldly, including the world itself.

While meditation usually begins with sitting cross-legged and focusing on breathing, it can actually begin in any pose at any time. Even when sitting cross-legged, individuals are not required to maintain a 'perfect' pose, such as straightening the body or keeping the head upright. The main intention when positioning the body in meditation is to reach the most comfortable point that is relaxing. When the eyes are closed, the real challenge arises, as there is no longer a barrier between the mind and the self that comes in the form of silence. *Vipassana* meditation encourages individuals to encounter thoughts (especially unpleasant ones) more intensely over time so that the feeling of pain towards the thoughts decreases. Individuals learn to accept their thoughts without judgment [9]. By getting used to encountering negative thoughts, individuals can better realize that the fatal effects of thoughts can appear only when we enable them.

This stillness and confluence of thoughts is the 'healing' aspect of meditation and provides a meaningful experience that is often difficult to put into words and share with others. The atmosphere of silence continually encourages emotions to emerge, allowing one to go deeper into the experience [11]. During meditation, a person can become very aware of himself and others around him, because in essence meditation is able to draw individuals to be in the present as much as possible, aware of his own thoughts and his environment. For people with mental health disorders who are often distracted by their thoughts, being aware of their surroundings can be very helpful. The implication is that

meditation can be used as a medium for therapy or healing trauma from the past [9] and there are increasing efforts to modify and integrate meditation practices into a healthy lifestyle by integrating it into secular/non-Buddhist activities such as yoga or alternative healing methods.

3.2 Secularization of Meditation Practice to Maintain Wellness

Almost half of the interlocutors admitted that they practiced meditation for various purposes related to maintaining mental health balance. Although the triggers of the problems they face are various, they feel that meditation can be a catharsis for the problems that occur in their lives. Most of them became familiar with meditation during the COVID-19 pandemic and found out from cyberspace about the basics of doing meditation by themselves at home (e.g. through audio meditation guides on Youtube or through mobile apps for meditation beginners). In the midst of uncertain situations and all the limitations that exist, quite a lot of people feel stressed and experience mental health disorders during the pandemic.

Like AN (19 years old), she feels that the pandemic has confined her to her home and narrowed her social space. Although she lives with her family, due to the conflict between them, she feels increasingly uncomfortable and depressed. She then chose to stay indoors more often and meditate through an app on her phone that provides meditation directions through recordings of nature sounds, such as water gurgling, bird sounds, and wind blowing. She admits that by regularly doing such meditation by her bedside, she feels helped by the calmness that comes after meditating despite being close to the source of her own problems, namely her family. To this day, she still meditates regularly although with a different technique, which uses incense props and focuses on breathing only. When the pandemic passed and she began to enter college, meditation became one of the efforts she made if she was hit by burnout due to coursework and other student activities. In her opinion, meditation activities and spirituality are two different things, so even though she is a Muslim, she feels that she does not perform other religious worship activities and also does not affect her spirituality. Since she has experienced the positive impact of meditation for mental balance, she does not hesitate to recommend her friends to also meditate and relax using incense sticks if they are facing the same burnout.

In contrast to ZR (21 years old), she herself has felt that her mental health has been disturbed since she was a teenager due to family trauma and pressure in college. The disturbances she experienced were often in the form of sleeplessness and hallucinations, so she then self-taught herself to try meditation to help her mental condition better. She meditates every morning on her balcony with guidance from YouTube. She finds that meditation forces her to be aware and focused on the present moment as her senses become very sensitive, especially smell and hearing. Despite the distraction of the road noise, she feels that her awareness is sharpened because meditating outdoors can help her distinguish hallucinatory sounds from those in the real world. She keeps up this

meditation habit because after consulting with her psychiatrist, meditation is highly recommended to help the healing process. The principles of awareness and focus that she gained from her meditation practice were then integrated into her prayer practice as a Muslim. She believes that by integrating the attitude of awareness and focus that she has gained in meditation into the *shalat* that she routinely performs 5 times a day, she is getting used to and trained to have the qualities of awareness.

Another story comes from JS (20 years old), who also experienced mental health problems through a diagnosis from a psychiatrist and chose meditation as an effort to help herself. She has been familiar with the practice of meditation since childhood because it was introduced by her mother who chose to convert to Buddhism. JS's mother often invited her to meditate both at home and at Tanah Putih Theravada Monastery, which is located in the east of Semarang city and has been established since 1963. However, JS did not immediately follow in her mother's path to convert, but after several years of self-discovery and agnosticism, JS was finally convinced to embrace Islam when she started university. JS did not refuse to meditate, in fact she often combined it with Muslim worship practices, such as *dhikr*, but she felt burdened when she was invited to meditate in a monastery guided by a monk and facing a Buddhist altar. There is an inner turbulence that arises in the form of reluctance to salute the monk and chant the pujas that are part of the meditation procession in the monastery. Even when she came to meditate at the monastery, she only did it to honor her mother and also her younger siblings who are now also Buddhists. JS said that she is more comfortable doing movement meditation and also meditating in places that have a different energy and sacredness, such as temples. Although temples are places that are synonymous with Buddhism, especially in Indonesia, the absence of Buddha statues in temples makes her feel more free and she does not feel like she is performing worship in another religion that conflicts with her.

From some of the case examples described, the secularization transition that occurs in the practice of meditation shows a positive side for people who practice it even though the substance of meditation is religiously separated by the practitioner. In terms of the ultimate goal, the drive to meditate is not for spiritual attainment and enlightenment like Buddhists, but they stop at the most superficial goal, which is mindfulness. The inherent value of mindfulness has the same resonance with the values of general mental states such as calmness, self-control, focus, and emotional stability. As such, it is quite easy for non-Buddhist meditation practitioners to embrace the most basic principles of meditation, and it is even a common phenomenon that meditation has come to be considered a lifestyle rather than a spiritual practice.

This finding is relevant to the very nature of the practice of secularization, which indicates a transition from a religious to a more worldly stage [7]. When tracing the origins of secularism, Latré said that the word 'secular' was used to refer to the change of ecclesiastical ownership for the purpose of civil society, as well as close to the idea of rationalization and modernization [5]. Through the phenomenon of secularization in meditation practices, the facts that we can find are not only how the boundaries of

religion and the secular become loose so that the dogma of religious teachings is no longer sacred and exclusive that can only be practiced by its adherents, but also the existence of religion that does not necessarily disappear even though humans are increasingly rational in the modern era like today. Some people are even able to combine their religious practices with meditation as a practice from other religions, or also known as the process of trans-traditionalization [8].

4 Conclusion

The universalization that occurs in the practice of meditation has proved that a religious practice can be adopted by people from various backgrounds, including non-Buddhists. This makes meditation considered a secular and universal practice, not just specific to Buddhist groups. As with the group of Diponegoro University students who practice meditation, they see meditation as a therapeutic technique that is neutral and focuses on the human body. On the other hand, this secular meditation also has ethical implications in the form of inviting many people to engage in spiritual practices without having to abandon their faith. By making meditation a self-care method to deal with the dynamics of life in the era of neoliberalism, it indirectly shows that they are trying to solve the problems faced in a neoliberalist way as well: the commodification of spirituality, personal responsibility, and self-development. On the other hand, self-reliance through the trans-traditionalization of meditation practices may show a great individual resilience, but in the perspective of the neoliberalism phenomenon, this individualism only benefits the government that 'ignores' the welfare of its citizens.

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