

Beyond Religions: The Serenity of Fasting in Buddhism and its Impact on Mental Well-being

ABSTRACT

This research delves into the practice of fasting in Buddhism, specifically focusing on Vihara Karuna Mukti in Bandung, Indonesia, and its implications for mental well-being. Fasting is a religious practice observed in various faiths, including Buddhism, and this study aims to explore its significance within this particular context. Using a descriptive qualitative research approach, the author investigates the practice of fasting in Buddhism, employing data collection techniques such as observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that at Vihara Karuna Mukti, fasting is observed on specific dates according to the Buddhist calendar, including the 1st, 8th, 15th, and 22nd days of the lunar month, as well as by the monks who fast daily. Buddhists are permitted to consume food from morning until noon, approximately from 7:00 AM to 12:00 PM, after which they abstain from eating until the following day. However, they are still allowed to drink water during the fasting period. Additionally, adherence to Atthasila, which encompasses eight virtues, is expected during fasting. The study concludes that the practice of fasting among Buddhists at Vihara Karuna Mukti holds implications for mental well-being when approached with sincerity. Fasting aids in cultivating self-control, promoting a sense of inner calmness, and nurturing virtues such as patience and honesty. It highlights the transformative potential of fasting as a means to enhance mental and spiritual aspects of life beyond religious boundaries. Overall, this research sheds light on the serenity of fasting in Buddhism and its positive impact on mental well-being, providing valuable insights into the interplay between religious practices and personal growth within the context of Vihara Karuna Mukti.

Keywords: Fasting; Buddhism; Mental Health

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an important aspect of human life that should not be ignored. Attention to mental health is increasing in various countries, including Indonesia. According to the results of the I-NAMHS survey (2022), around one in three adolescents aged 10-17 years in Indonesia (around 15.5 million adolescents) experienced mental health problems in the past year. As many as one in 20 adolescents (approximately 2.45 million adolescents) also experienced mental disorders, with anxiety disorders being the most common (3.7%), followed by major depressive disorder (1%), conduct disorder (0.9%), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (0.5%), and ADHD (0.5%). These data indicate a significant prevalence of mental health problems among Indonesian adolescents.

This fact is a serious concern for the government, society, and health institutions in Indonesia. Prevention and treatment of mental health disorders have been prioritised in the national health agenda. In addition to medical approaches and psychological therapies, spiritual activities and practices have also been highlighted in maintaining and improving one's mental health.

In this context, the religious practice of fasting has attracted attention as one of the spiritual approaches that can have a positive impact on mental health. Fasting is not only a prevalent practice in Islam, but is also found in other religions, including Buddhism. Previous research on religion and health has identified several main categories of relevance. Firstly, there are studies that explore the relationship between religious activities and mental health. These studies involve practices such as prayer, meditation, religious rituals, and participation in religious groups (G. Koenig & Larson, 2001; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003).

Secondly, there is research that focuses on the role of religion in coping with stress, trauma, and life crises (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Park, 2005). This involves utilising social support from religious communities, spiritual beliefs, and religious practices as coping strategies. Thirdly, several studies have examined the relationship between religion and physical health, including the influence of religious practices on diet, alcohol consumption, and other healthy behaviours (Levin & Vanderpool, 1987; Oman & Reed, 1998). Finally, there are studies that examine the effects of religion and spirituality on quality of life and life satisfaction (Manning-Walsh, 2005; Peterson & Webb, 2006). This categorisation provides a broad view of religion's contribution to holistic health, encompassing mental, emotional, physical and social aspects.

While there have been several studies on the relationship between religion and mental health, especially in the context of religious practices, there seems to be no study that specifically explores the influence of fasting practices in Buddhism on mental health, especially one conducted at Karuna Mukti Monastery in Bandung. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the practice of fasting in Buddhism at Karuna Mukti Monastery and how the practice impacts the mental health of the practitioners.

This research has important academic implications in the fields of religious studies, mental health, and the interaction between the two. By deepening the understanding of the practice of fasting in Buddhism and its impact on mental health, this study can make a new contribution to academic knowledge on the relationship between religion and health. These implications may inspire follow-up

research and further scholarly discussions on the role of religious practices in improving mental well-being and provide important insights for mental health practitioners, researchers, and the general public in developing a holistic approach to human health and well-being.

METHOD

The author uses a qualitative approach. This approach examines natural objects and researchers as key instruments, data collection techniques with observation, interviews, and documentation, data analysis is inductive, and the research results emphasize meaning (Sugiyono, 2010). The research method used is the descriptive method. The descriptive method is researching the status of human groups, objects, conditions, systems of thought, or events in the present. This method aims to make a description or description systematically, factually, and accurately about the facts, properties, and relationships between the phenomena being investigated.

According to Nazir, quoting Whitney's opinion, the descriptive method is the search for facts with the correct interpretation. Descriptive research studies problems in society and the procedures that apply in certain situations, including relationships, activities, attitudes, views, ongoing processes, and the effects of a phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2010).

In this study, the authors used two data sources: First, Primary Data Sources. Primary data sources are data obtained directly from the first source. The primary data sources in this study were obtained directly from Pandita and the administrators at Vihara Karuna Mukti as sources. Second, Secondary Data Sources. Researchers collect secondary data sources as an addition or support from the first data source. The author uses books, journals, and articles from the internet as supporting data. Data Collection Techniques: Observation, Interview, and Documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Profile of Karuna Mukti Monastery Bandung

This monastery was established on December 14, 1997, but was still in the form of an ordinary house. Renovations were carried out because the old building was inadequate and could not accommodate the increasing number of Buddhists. On September 28, 2004, the groundbreaking of the monastery began with the recitation of the holy partitas. The event was attended by five monks from the Indonesian Theravada Sangha, namely Bhikkhu Sukhemo Mahathera, Bhikkhu Sri Subalaratano Mahathera, Bhikkhu Atthakaro, Bhikkhu Pannanando, and Bhikkhu Cittagutto.

The groundbreaking of the monastery was started by Bhikkhu Sukhemo Mahathera, followed by Bhikkhu Cittagutto, Parjo Darmosuwito (Head of the West Java Regional Office of Buddhism), Prof. Dr. Ir. Gede Raka (Chairman of Dhammavijaya Foundation), Pandita T. Harmanto (Magabudhi), Ramani Vimala Puspita (Wandani), Sukarman (Patria) and Liana (Donor). The construction of Karuna Mukti Vihara costs around Rp. 870,000,000. The monastery, originally just

an ordinary house, has now become a two-story building that stands majestically and can accommodate many Buddhists who want to worship there.



Figure 1. Front view of the Karuna Mukti Monastery Building in Bandung

Source: personal documents



Figure 2. Karuna Mukti Monastery is adjacent to the Assalaam Mosque in Balonggode Village, Regol District, Bandung City.

Source: personal documents.

2. History of Fasting in Buddhism

All religions in the world teach about fasting but in different ways. Fasting in Buddhism is called Uposatha. The word Uposatha comes from the Sanskrit

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Upavasatha. Uposatha means dwelling deeply, staying close, practicing, maintaining, and caring (Prasanti, 2017). According to practice, Uposatha means staying in the monastery, reading holy partitas, listening to Dhammadesena, meditating, and practicing Atthasila until the day ends (Albastomi, 2018; Ariyanto & Prasetyo, 2019)

This fasting practice was practiced before the time of the Buddha. During the Buddha's lifetime, some ascetics taught the teachings at the time of the new and full moon. At the request of King Bimbisara of Magadha, the Buddha established the day of Uposatha and instructed monks and nuns to give teachings to the people on that day. The Buddha also instructed his disciples to repeat the Patimokkha.

“The fasting practiced by us dates back to pre-Buddhist times. At that time, Prince Siddhartha did meditation while fasting. At first, he did an extreme fast, eating only sesame seeds, but eventually, he realized that his fasting was not right. It made his body weak and thin. So he began to change his habits, drinking milk and eating offering porridge. Prince Siddhartha meditated until he finally became enlightened. After becoming the Buddha, he established the Uposatha Day at the suggestion of King Bimbisara of the Kingdom of Magadha. Then the Buddha instructed the monks to deliver lectures in the form of the Buddha's teachings to the local population. And until now, the Uposatha is carried out by Buddhists”. (PMY. Suyanto, Personal Communication, September 29, 2019).

The Buddha taught that the Uposatha day for the noble class of people is to cleanse the mind of impurities with the proper process. They contemplate the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha to calm their minds (Fitriani, 2009). Then they also contemplate their goodness, without lust and delusion, praiseworthy, leading to the concentration of mind and the glory of the gods and the goodness of Arahants (saints).

“At that time, the Arahants always abandoned blameworthy deeds by avoiding killing. They also did good to each other, did not take things that did not belong to them, in their minds there was not the slightest desire to steal, they also avoided having sex, they always spoke the truth, and avoided harsh and untrue speech, the Arahants also during their lifetime abstained from drinking intoxicating drinks, they did not drink liquor, wine and the like. During their lifetime, the Arahants only eat once a day. They refrain from eating at the wrong time, afternoon until the next day. They also avoid performances, dancing, singing, and the like, which make them complacent about worldly life. And finally, the Arahants also avoid sleeping in high or luxurious places, so they only sleep in low places or on mats. On the day of Uposatha, Upasaka/Upasika are also required to practice Pancasila and are allowed to choose to practice Atthasila at certain times. For Samanera/Samaneri, they practice the Ten Principles and 72 Samanera-dukkha. As for the Bhikkhus/Bhikkhunis, they observe the Ten Principles and 227 Patimokkha-sila.” (PMY. Suyanto, Personal Communication, September 29, 2019).

3. Fasting Practices in Buddhism at Karuna Mukti Monastery Bandung

Fasting at Karuna Mukti Monastery is carried out every 1st, 8th, 15th, and 22nd of the Buddhist calendar. Some only carry it out in the dark and light months. In the rules, the practice of fasting carried out by Buddhists starts in the morning when the sun has risen from 07:00 until 12:00, they are allowed to eat at that time, and after midday, they are not allowed to eat until the next day. However, fasting in Buddhism is still allowed to drink water.

“Fasting here is done four times a month, every 1st, 8th, 15th, and 22nd. But if you want to improve the practice even more deeply, you can do it daily. For example, there is a program called Atthasila for one month during the Vesak celebration. During the month, Buddhists practice Atthasila, or eight virtues, namely not killing living beings, not stealing, not committing unholy acts, not lying, not eating and drinking intoxicants, will not eat after noon, so fasting Buddhists eat after sunrise around 7 am then lunch around 11-12. After that, it is not allowed to eat but still allowed to drink water. The next is not watching performances, dancing, singing, wearing fragrances, and the last is not sleeping in high or luxurious places.” (PMy. Suyanto, Personal Communication, September 29, 2019).

The practice of fasting in Buddhism differs between Monks and laypeople. In the Theravada Sangha tradition, monks fast every day to purify or clear their hearts and minds. Unlike lay people, fasting is done on Uposatha days or during the designated dark and light months (Syukur, 2007).

Pmy. Suyanto explained that Buddhists who carry out fasting must obey the rules set. The rules contain eight virtues, which are as follows: First, *Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to kill living beings). The first precept advises Buddhists not to kill all living beings, whether fellow humans or animals. Even the most miniature animals, such as fleas, mosquitoes, and ants, are forbidden to be killed. Buddhists are encouraged to give lovingkindness to all living beings on earth.

Second, *Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to steal). The second precept, Buddhists are encouraged not to steal or take things that do not belong to them. In Buddhism, stealing or taking other people's goods without the owner's permission is one of the violations of the precepts that can bring suffering to the thief. Third, *Abrahmacariya veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to lead a sinful life). The third precept encourages Buddhists not to commit unholy acts, namely prohibiting immoral acts such as committing adultery, even having sex for those who are legally married is not allowed when the Buddhist is fasting (Azisi & Yusuf, 2021).

Fourth, *Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to speak lies, slander, or harsh words). The fourth precept, Buddhists are encouraged not to speak lies, slander, and speak harshly. Buddhists who practice fasting should always maintain their speech, speak politely, and not let words be untrue and hurt others. Fifth, *Suramerayamajja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to eat and drink intoxicants). In the fifth precept, Buddhists are advised not to eat foods or drink beverages that cause loss of consciousness. For example, liquor, alcoholic beverages, drugs, and so on.

Sixth, *Vikalabhajana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to eat after noon). The sixth precept is that fasting Buddhists are prohibited from eating after noon. They are allowed to eat from 7 am to 12 pm, after which they are not allowed to eat until the next day. Seventh, *Naccagita-vadita-visukkadassanamalagandha-vilepana-dharana-mandana-vibhusanathana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to watch shows, wear perfumes and apply makeup). In the seventh precept, fasting Buddhists are not allowed to watch performances such as music, soccer, soap operas, and other entertainment. They are also prohibited from singing, dancing, wearing fragrances, and applying makeup (dressing up or wearing jewelry).

Eighth, *Uccasayana-Mahayana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami* (I resolve not to sleep in luxurious or high places). This last precept encourages Buddhists not to sleep in luxurious or high beds. Buddhists who are fasting choose a lower bed or sleep on a mat only. Every fasting Buddhist must observe the eight precepts of morality above. If one of the precepts is violated, the fast is not valid.

Table 1. Uposatha Calendar 2020

No.	Moon	Uposatha Bright	Dark Uposatha	Uposatha Bright
1.	January	10 (Friday)	24 (Friday)	-
2.	February	08 (Saturday)	23 (Sunday)	-
3.	March	09 (Monday)	24 (Tuesday)	-
4.	April	07 (Tuesday)	22 (Wednesday)	-
5.	May	06 (Wednesday)	21 (Thursday)	-
6.	June	05 (Friday)	20 (Saturday)	-
7.	July	05 (Sunday)	20 (Monday)	-
8.	August	04 (Tuesday)	18 (Tuesday)	-
9.	September	02 (Wednesday)	17 (Thursday)	-
10.	October	02 (Friday)	16 (Friday)	31 (Saturday)
11.	November	-	15 (Sunday)	30 (Monday)
12.	December	-	14 (Monday)	29 (Tuesday)

Source: personal documents.

The Monks and Samanera of the Indonesian Theravada Sangha use the above calendar.

4. Implications of Fasting in Buddhism for Mental Health

Fasting is one of the religious rituals that has benefits for physical and mental health. As explained earlier, fasting in Buddhism is accompanied by observing eight rules of morality. The implementation of fasting has implications for the physical and mental health of Buddhists who practice it (Malik, 2011). Fasting is also essential in achieving the perfection of Prince Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha).

Pmy Suyanto explained the benefits of fasting accompanied by the implementation of 8 rules of morality for the mental health of those who carry it out, namely as follows (PMy. Suyanto, Personal Communication, September 29, 2019). The first precept, Buddhists are advised not to kill or harm living beings, whether humans or animals. Killing is an immoral act that must be avoided because the impact of this act will affect mental health. When someone has committed murder,

they will not be at peace, haunted by fear and guilt. Buddhists who practice this precept will have a good mentality and avoid mental disorders or diseases.

The second precept, Buddhists are advised not to steal or take other people's goods without the owner's permission. This precept teaches Buddhists not to take the rights of others. One of the functions of fasting is as a treatment for people with mental disorders. By fasting, the patient is tried to refrain from doing bad things. The third precept is that Buddhists are encouraged not to do unholy deeds such as sexual intercourse. One of the benefits of fasting is to control lust. By fasting, our emotions and lust can be controlled properly.

The fourth precept, Buddhists are prohibited from speaking lies, abusive or slanderous. Lying is an act that must be avoided because it dramatically affects mental health. When someone lies, they will be filled with anxiety, which can lead to depression because they are worried that others know the lie. Buddhists are trained to be honest with themselves and others to avoid these mental disorders by fasting and practicing this precept.

In the fifth precept, Buddhists are advised not to eat and drink intoxicants or drinks that cause loss of consciousness. Intoxicating drinks such as alcohol significantly affect the functioning of the brain. People with an alcohol addiction will often feel depression, mood disorders, loss of consciousness, and even damage to the nervous system. Fasting has the benefit of overcoming alcohol addiction to avoid these mental disorders. The sixth precept, Buddhists are encouraged not to eat after noon. Buddhists are trained to endure hunger, and fasting is the best way for people who want to lose weight because fasting makes the body healthy. By practicing this precept, Buddhists are also trained to avoid greed.

The seventh precept, Buddhists are advised not to watch performances, sing, dance, or wear perfumes and not to make up. Buddhists are trained to reduce greed and worldly pleasures by avoiding these things. In the eighth precept, Buddhists are advised not to sleep in luxurious or high places. Buddhists fasting and practicing this precept are encouraged to sleep in low places or on mats only. The practice of this precept teaches Buddhists to get used to living.

According to Pmy. Suyanto, fasting has implications for mental health (PMy. Suyanto, Personal Communication, September 29, 2019). When he fasts, he feels many positive things, including First, the heart and mind become calmer. By fasting, he feels calmness, tranquility, and peace in his heart and mind. According to him, when he is fasting, his heart and mind become calmer than when he is not fasting. Second, Reduced anxiety, depression, and stress. As previously said, fasting calms his heart and mind, so the anxiety, depression, and stress he feels are reduced when he fasts. According to him, fasting can also cure stress and other mental disorders.

Third. Able to control lust. Fasting makes him more able to control the lust that is in him. When fasting, he learns to be able to refrain from various things, including learning to control or control lust. Fourth, being able to control emotions within. When fasting, he is better able to control his emotions because fasting teaches a person to be patient, not only to endure hunger but also to endure anger.

Fifth, Instilling honesty in oneself. When fasting, we are trained to be honest with others and ourselves because whether someone is fasting or not, only that person and God know. This honesty will bring peace to the soul of the fasting person so that his mental and physical health becomes healthy. Sixth, the best way to lose

weight. Fasting is the best way for someone who wants to lose weight. He said that fasting is also perfect for one's physical health. Fasting can be a way to diet because when fasting, our diet is regular and not excessive.

Upc. Sukarman said that there are many benefits he gets when fasting, both for physical and mental health. According to him, fasting is a way to train his patience and self-control. By fasting, he feels better and healthier.

"Fasting has implications for mental health because fasting has many benefits, including practicing patience. When fasting, we have to be patient to endure hunger and restrain our emotions so that we don't speak harshly, lie, and abuse people, and we also have to restrain or control our lust so that we don't do bad things that can break our fast. When fasting, I feel that I am more able to be patient and restrain my lust. For example, when fasting, I don't overeat, I don't get angry, I don't talk about people." (Upc. Sukarman, Personal Communication, September 29, 2019).

The benefit of fasting is practicing patience. When fasting, we are required to be patient in waiting for the time to break the fast, be patient to endure hunger, be patient to restrain the tongue so as not to speak harshly, lie, revile others, and be patient not to do other things that can break the fast. Humans were created with reason and lust by God. Lust encourages humans to do bad things and is only related to worldly pleasures. Therefore, humans must be able to control themselves.

By fasting, humans are trained to control or control themselves because when fasting, we not only endure hunger but also must be able to control ourselves by restraining emotions and lust so as not to commit sin. As explained in the theoretical basis, fasting has a close relationship with mental health because fasting fosters a person's mentality, keeps someone away from mental or mental illness, and can also cure people who experience mental disorders. For example, sufferers who experience insomnia (insomnia) have difficulty sleeping but by diligently fasting in a row the person can slowly eliminate the disease.

When fasting, a person will become closer to God. That closeness can make the mind calmer and relieve stress, so no terrible thoughts interfere, and mentally become healthier. Fasting that is done correctly and seriously will keep us away from bad traits, erode the disease of the heart that is within us, foster a healthier mentality, and can even be a cure for people who experience mental disorders.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research and discussion regarding the practice of fasting in Buddhism and its implications for mental health at Vihara Karuna Mukti Bandung, it is concluded that: First, the practice of fasting at Karuna Mukti Monastery Bandung is carried out every 1st, 8th, 15th, and 22nd according to the Buddhist calendar. There are differences between lay people and monks in carrying out fasting. Lay people only fast on predetermined dates, while monk fasting is daily. Buddhists are allowed to eat from morning until noon, around midnight. After midday, they are not allowed to eat until the next day but are still allowed to drink water. In addition, Buddhists are required to obey Atthasila, which contains eight precepts, namely: no killing of living beings, no stealing, no unholy acts, no lying, no intoxicating food and drink, no eating after noon, no watching performances,

dancing, singing, wearing perfume, applying makeup, and no sleeping in luxurious or high places. Buddhists must abide by these eight precepts for their fast to be perfect. If one of the precepts is violated, then their fast is invalid.

Second, Buddhist fasting has implications for mental health. By fasting, the heart and mind become calmer, reducing anxiety, depression, and stress. Fasting also instills honesty and patience in the person who carries it out. In addition, fasting can also be self-control because when fasting, a person must control himself from his lust and emotions. Buddhists who practice fasting correctly and seriously will avoid bad things, have healthy physical and mental health, and avoid mental disorders and mental illness

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