



Buddhist Meditation, Ascetic Education, and Emotional Intelligence

An Autoethnography as a Temporary Monk

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ABSTRACT

Ascetic education through meditation is one of the most critical aspects of Buddhism to observe consciousness through the process of the cognitive senses doors (*Pancadvāravīthi*) and inner doors (*Manodvāravīthi*). This article reviews ascetic education as a learning autonomy in inquiry-based learning and reflective practice in seeking the essence of life. The paper uses the autoethnographic notes of the researcher as a temporary monk when attending the *Pabbaja Samanera* in December 2022 at Megamendung Bogor Hermitage by Dhammavihari Buddhist Studies. This temporary monk training based on *Abhidhamma* education uses a 2567-year-old curriculum by Buddha Gautama in India, which emphasizes noble silence without verbal and thought interaction and lives by the monks' rules. The study concludes that there are fundamental differences between Western education, which is based on cognitive intelligence, and Eastern education, especially Dharma from India, which is based on emotional intelligence. Second, the reflective capacity in Buddhist ascetic education through contemplative meditation aims to let go of worldly attachments. Third, the ultimate goal of Buddhist teaching is to realize *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (non-self-teaching).

Keywords: *Ascetic education, Buddhist meditation, emotional intelligence.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper recounts the author's experiences in an autobiographical way to reflect on the experience as a temporary monk while attending *Pabbaja* from *Dhammavihari* Buddhist Studies from 23 December 2022 to 2 January 2023 with the noble silence rule to intensify meditation education. *Dhammavihari* Buddhist Studies is a *Theravada* Buddhist organization in Indonesia under the tutelage of Venerable Ashin Kheminda since 2015, which focuses on developing Buddhist teachings, as the word *Dhammavihari* means someone who lives according to Dhamma. I follow this intensive meditation practice as a spiritual journey and self-discovery to understand my inner character.

In several Buddhist traditions around the world, the activities of temporary monks have become a culture that is rooted in several Buddhist countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, where at least once in their lives, both men and women are encouraged to follow the practice of temporary monks to train intelligence and spiritual management abilities from adolescence, adulthood, to old age.

In a number of studies, the activities of temporary monks are strongly related to self-control training (Aich, 2013), so the ideal training is carried out based on Buddhism, which is rooted in letting go of all desires that lead to suffering (Shaw, 2006). In this case, the education of temporary monks is carried out using two approaches based on the participants; for participants who are children, this activity is part of parenting, while for adults, this education is part of asceticism education to strengthen the elements of spiritual resilience strength of each participant. Meditation education is an ascetic education that educates its participants to go against the flow of desires, such as a study conducted by Brown (2001) on a Buddhist nun who seeks to let go of the world's desires and maintain inner mental health.

Within the short span of temporary monk training, each participant adapts to monastic activities to detach from material obsession, obtain self-discipline, an altruistic spirit, and mindfulness in everyday life (Divino, 2023; Naim, 2000; Wallace, 2014). The key to practicing mindfulness for everyday life is always to be aware, especially when we face turbulence in interacting with others due to gossip or other negative energy (Prastowo, 2023). So, the temporary monk education process is usually designed to maintain noble silence by prohibiting interaction with other people to minimize the emergence of new destructive emotions that can disrupt concentration during training.

I followed the decision to become a temporary monk driven by a personal need to strengthen the emotional education that is useful as an adult human being. I wrote this article as a reflective note while participating in temporary monk activities by asking an a priori question about the meaning of Buddhist meditation practice in emotional management as part of ascetic education in adulthood (Kim, Khil, Seo, & Keum, 2002). Two images are provided to show a glimpse of training monk such as myself (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 Group photo in temporary monk training. (Source: Dhammavihari, 2023)



Figure 2 My photo with Ven. Ashin Kheminda (with permission).

The autoethnographic approach is used to take a closer look at the dialogs of experience while participating in activities, as well as self-dynamics in interpreting a number of concepts in Buddhism in everyday life.

2. METHOD

This study used autoethnography (Garbe, 2023) which is a cross between ethnography and biography as a reflective record of the researcher's experiences while participating in the activities of temporary monks from *Dhammavihari* Buddhist Studies.

What is explored in autoethnography is the researcher's personal experience while conducting ethnography, which is linked to the social and cultural context of that experience (Wall, 2006). Writing from the researcher's perspective as a subject, as well as fieldwork from intrapersonal experiences, is the strength of in-depth reflective data, as well as being a limitation of bias in what is written (Sunday, Ramugondo, & Kathard, 2020). The latest methodological development is Collaborative Autoethnography to facilitate comprehensive narratives through "shared experiences" in a community area in a qualitative context (Tiffany, Minematsu, & Bosca, 2023). The primary data is an intrapersonal dialogue by the researcher himself while participating in the activity, as well as an intrapersonal dialogue while being a temporary monk with several data collection interviews and small talks with other participants who participated in this activity (Lapadat, 2017).

According to Garbe (2023), the autoethnographic method has strengths regarding the in-depth narration of experience elements in qualitative research. However, it also has limitations, namely that the narration only comes

from one-sided, namely the point of view of the author preparing his experience as a temporary monk in the *Theravada* tradition in Indonesia. The data processing technique uses a chronological model from notes on the researcher's experiences and personal reflections that I wrote while being a temporary monk to see dialogue between inner conversations and elements outside the researcher.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *At A Distance from The World: Pabbaja's Description as An Intensive Meditation Practice*

When I shaved off my head, I asked myself what I would get when I joined this temporary monk activity with noble silence. Can I endure speaking during the activity? Can I fulfill all the complicated rules? Can I enjoy this very intensive meditative activity? I then tried to read a number of these regulations (Excerpt 1) in more detail, one part of which states

Excerpt 1

Becoming a *Pabbajjā* participant is a means to practice yourself and always accept conditions as they are at every opportunity.

One of the most demanding training as a temporary monk is noble silence. There is even a rule that states that if a participant is found to have violated noble silence by speaking, they will be sent home on the day the violation occurred. As with other temporary monk education, this intensive training practice activity from *Dhammavihari* Buddhist Studies has a number of strict main rules to support noble silence as follows.

1. Main rules of temporary monk: *sāmaṇera* (temporary monk) and *sayalay* (temporary nun) are required to practice *dasasīla* (10 precepts) and 75 *sekhiyavatta*, aṭṭhasīlani observe *aṭṭhangasīla* (8 precepts).
2. Noble silence rules: participants are required to observe noble silence. Participants are strictly prohibited from communicating with other participants during the exercise, anywhere, including in the bedroom and dormitory, either verbally or nonverbally in any form, including through body sign language, eye contact interaction codes, and message notes. In this case, participants are only allowed to speak to the supervising teacher, Venerable Ashin Kheminda, in the dhamma talk and interview sessions and to the committee in writing if there is an urgent need.
3. Meditation Rules: participants must follow all schedules, instructions, and directions given by the supervising teacher in training themselves to do *samatha* meditation. Do meditation according to the instructions of the supervising teacher. Not practicing any other meditation method than the one taught. This includes performing healing practices, rites, and rituals.
4. Meal rules: take enough food as needed to avoid wasting food. For vegetarian participants, the committee provides vegetarian vegetables/side dishes. The committee will instruct that the vegetables/side dishes are vegetarian.

In this practice, temporary monks get 75 rules or *sekhiyavatta*. The practice that monks must undertake to train themselves is called *sekhiyavatta*. This *sekhiyavatta* consists of 4 groups. The first group is *Sārūppa* – regarding proper conduct—and the second group is the *Bhojanapaṭisaṃyutta* – regarding food. The third group is called *Dhammadesanaṭisaṃyutta* – on how to teach the Dhamma. The fourth group is called *Pakiṇṇaka* – regarding various rules. An illustration of the daily activities carried out during this intensive training activity is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Daily curriculum of a monk

Daily Curriculum	
04.00-05.00	Wake up early with the bell of awareness.
05.00-05.30	Morning Chanting
05.30-06.30	Meditation
06.30-07.00	<i>Pindapata</i>
07.00-07.30	Breakfast (The monk diet rules only eat until before 12.00 or at noon)
07.30-08.00	Rest
08.00-10.30	Meditation
10.30-11.00	<i>Pindapata</i>
11.00-12.00	Lunch (The monk diet rules only eat until before 12.00 or at noon)
12.00-13.00	Rest
13.00-17.00	Meditation
17.00-18.00	Rest
18.00-18.30	Afternoon chanting
18.30-20.00	Meditation
20.00-21.00	<i>Dhammatalk</i>
21.00	Rest

From all the activities in Table 1, all temporary monk activities are meditation with strict rules about noble silence (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2

Meditation is the main element in Buddhist education to understand the working process of consciousness through the process of the cognitive senses doors (*Pancadvāravāthi*) and inner doors (*Manodvāravāthi*), as humans we are often trapped in the mistake of defining happiness as the ownership of material goods, sometimes “In this time, all participants in this intensive meditation training are forced to understand the entire process of consciousness within oneself which is constantly changing” as Ashin Kheminda expressed in Dhammatalks.

Like many other participants, I experienced difficulty conquering myself because the cognitive work process in everyday life is more obsessed with material objects, as is in line with Western education, which sees cognitive intelligence as a fundamental element of human success.

Concretely, an example of the challenge of why almost all participants experienced meditation was shared when sharing moments every afternoon prayer. During my cognitive-based Western education, I was used to using the cognitive sense doors process to analyze all events that occur every day. However, in the meditation process, experience during training is to control the inner doors rather than getting a grade from the teacher. This is the cognitive process in the Western concept of education, assessed using assessment rankings that can be seen materially. However, the achievements of meditation are more abstract and subjective.

Alternatively, in religious studies, a similar concept is conveyed in Eliade’s concept in Hierophany, namely bringing about sacred situations in everyday life, where a person’s personal experience of sacredness is a subjective view of divinity regarding spirituality, which occurs in many people’s personal experiences with sacredness or miracles in various religions (Abrudan, 2021). The experiences of a person’s closeness in spirituality cannot be seen materially and are considered the main achievements in secular learning, which separates sacred and profane spaces so that learning is not interpreted as a cathartic space for the way of life (Ngcobo & Beyers, 2013; Rauf, 2022).

Apparently, after participating in temporary monk activities, I felt alienated from myself, which I did not recognize. What I perceive as success are the pseudo-standards of society that I have adopted as my standards. I then broke what I call a problem and call an achievement.

3.2. Reflection on the Relationship of Meditation with Asceticism Education and Emotional Management

So, what does meditation have to do with asceticism education? As I mentioned in the title, the two are closely related. The essence of Buddhism is to realize the three main components in its teachings, namely *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (non-self-teaching). Meditation in Buddhism is an integral part of training to understand oneself to gain inner peace and spiritual enlightenment, as taught by Siddhartha Gautama.

As in line with the daily curriculum above, there are several basic foundations in Buddhist meditation, namely, to realize Buddhism’s teachings related to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Meditation is a vital tool for cultivating mindfulness (Schedneck, 2011). According to Kumbukgolla, Jayaweera, Perera, & Hale (2019), several types of Buddhist meditation are (1) *samatha* meditation or a technique that emphasizes total concentration, as well as achieving calm from meditation practice; (2) *vipassana* meditation with a technique that trains insight to be able to make observations about the nature of reality. The practice is to understand that everything is constantly changing and the concept of non-self will (Thapar, 1981).

Apart from the two essential foundations of meditation in Buddhism related to *samatha* and *vipassana*, several meditations are also developing rapidly in the world, such as *metta Bhavana*, or loving-kindness meditation, which seeks to train feelings of love and compassion as part of the ethos of altruism in Buddhism. All meditation practices implemented during temporary monk training train mindfulness with a solid awareness of the present moment to improve emotional regulation and wisdom about life.

Then, what is the relation between meditation and ascetic education in Buddhism? Ascetic education refers to training focusing on self-control by letting go of delusional thought disorders that hinder understanding morality. Asceticism education exists worldwide in various cultures, religions, and traditions (Loy, 2000). The ultimate goal is to separate worldly desires from within. I reflect that during my temporary monk education, I was educated to always be contemplative of life as an ethos of detachment from sensual desires (Purton, 2017).

Patience is the most challenging practice for me as a temporary monk. I have to sit for long hours on the meditation mat or with walking meditation. Of course, I should not overthink or think about the past and future

because it will make me unable to meditate for a long time because I will easily experience discomfort. The practice of maintaining food like the monks' diet is reflected in the chanting that is done every time they eat food, which is done twice before noon or noon, as is the rule in Theravada. The chanting that is done while eating is described in the mantra of *Bhojjana Paccavekkhaṇa-pāṭham* (reflection on food) as follows.

1. *Paṭisaṅkhā yoniso piṇḍapātāṃ paṭisevāmi* (Reflecting on my true purpose of eating this food),
2. *Neva davāya, na madāya, na maṇḍanāya, na vibhūsanāya* (Not for pleasure, not to intoxicate, not to fatten the body, nor to beautify oneself),
3. *Yāvadeva imasa kāyassa ṭhitiyā, yāpanāya, vihiṃsūparatiyā, brahmacariyānuggahāya* (but only for the sustenance and support of this body, to stop malaise because of hunger and to aid ethical living),
4. *Iti purāṇaṅca vedanaṃ paṭihaṅkhāmi, navaṅca vedanaṃ na uppādessāmi* (I will get rid of old feelings “hunger” and will not give rise to new feelings “due to overeating”), and
5. *Yātrā ca me bhaviṣṣati anavajjatā ca phāsuviḥāro cā ti* (Thus there will be freedom for my body from distractions and can live in peace).

The chanting above, which is performed in eating meditation, contains the meaning of ascetic education that eating for temporary monks is a natural activity to fulfill the body's basic needs and the importance of controlling desires while eating, which gives rise to greed. By controlling food, the most basic human needs will become the foundation for controlling emotions because the principle of fasting is disciplining the body, which has an indirect impact on emotional management. Several detailed rules for eating are the most common components of the 75 rules for living as a temporary monk. These rules appear in rules number 27-56 in detail as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Rules for eating for living as a temporary monk

No.	Number of Rule	Rules
1.	Rule 27	I will receive my food with care and attention
2.	Rule 28	When I receive alms food, I will just look at the alms bowl
3.	Rule 29	I will receive side dishes in an amount commensurate with the rice I receive
4.	Rule 30	I will receive food according to my bowl/not so much that it spills
5.	Rule 31	I will eat my food with care and attention
6.	Rule 32	I will look at my own bowl while eating
7.	Rule 33	I would eat the beetroot food evenly
8.	Rule 34	I will eat side dishes with rice
9.	Rule 35	I will not take food/rice from top to bottom
10.	Rule 36	I will not hide side dishes under rice with the intention of getting more
11.	Rule 37	I will not ask for rice or side dishes for my own benefit unless I am sick
12.	Rule 38	I will not look with envy at other people's bowls
13.	Rule 39	I will not make a big mouthful
14.	Rule 40	I will make a round mouthful
15.	Rule 41	I will not open my mouth until a bite of food is very close to my mouth
16.	Rule 42	I will not put my fingers in my mouth when eating
17.	Rule 43	I will not talk with a mouth full of food
18.	Rule 44	I will not eat by throwing food into my mouth
19.	Rule 45	I will not eat by biting off chunks of rice
20.	Rule 46	I will not eat with puffed out cheeks
21.	Rule 47	I will not shake my hands while eating
22.	Rule 48	I will not drop/waste grains of rice at mealtime
23.	Rule 49	I will not stick out my tongue while eating
24.	Rule 50	I will not make soy sauce sounds while eating
25.	Rule 51	I will not eat by making a sound as if sucking (because it is soup)
26.	Rule 52	I will not lick my hands while eating
27.	Rule 53	I will not scrape the bottom of the bowl with my fingers, to give the impression that I have almost finished eating
28.	Rule 54	I will not lick my lips while eating
29.	Rule 55	I will not throw away bowl-washing water, which contains irrigation particles, in populated areas
30.	Rule 56	I will not accept a glassware bowl containing a drink while my hands are dirty with food

Apart from the strict rules regarding eating as a fundamental meditation practice to satisfy basic human needs, training in controlling emotions is reflected in the mantras recited during each meditation practice activity to the meditation teacher, as in the quote, *ācariya khamāyācana* (apologies to the teacher).

Temporary Monk Participant: *Okāsa dvāratayena kataṃ sabbāṃ accayaṃkhamatha me Bhante* (x3)

(Bhante, please forgive me for all the offenses I have committed through the three doors (mind, speech, and body)

Bhante: *Khamāmi, khamitabbāṃ*

(I forgive. I (too) should be forgiven)

Temporary monk participant: *Sādhu! okāsa khamāmi Bhante* (namakkāra 3x).

(Good. Permission, please. I forgive, *Bhante*)

In short, this meditation practice strongly connects with emotional management as an adult human, as in line with the 75 rules for living as a temporary monk. According to Olivelle (1998), several main components in emotional intelligence are divided into four parts: (1) self-awareness, which is related to meditation in the temporary monk training related to understanding one's own emotions and strong awareness in terms of understanding one's behavior with strengths, as well as weaknesses, (2) self-management, namely the ability to regulate emotional abilities and reactions in order to avoid stress and impulsiveness which causes mental disorders, (3) social awareness, namely the ability to empathize, being able to understand and control oneself when interacting with other people in the community or society, and (4) relationship management, namely the ability to navigate and interpersonal management to communicate several conflicts within oneself, in order to have the ability to adapt in society.

Cook (2009) stated that the concept of emotional intelligence was first used by Peter Salovey and John Mayer in the 1990s and was written about in a particular study by Daniel Goleman entitled "Emotional Intelligence" in 1995. As in line with the daily curriculum, 75 rules for living as a temporary monk, and the reflection on food above, Chen, Yang, Xiao, Xu, and Zhu (2023) wrote that Mindfulness meditation exercises affect the mental health of university students so they can regulate emotions in their study life. One of the fundamental principles in maintaining emotional intelligence is limiting desires, such as the principle of asceticism (Taneja, 2022). In his study, Olivelle (1998) saw that the principles of asceticism in Buddhism were also found in the concept of Brahmanism, a Dharma teaching in India. The principles of asceticism regarding emotional regulation are related to the ethos of detachment from the world, so meditation emphasizes liberation through efforts made by oneself (Al-Ghananeem, 2022; Spina, 2023; Yacoub, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

This article concludes that asceticism education in meditation during temporary monk practice aims to invite participants to learn to understand themselves from within themselves. This incidentally differs from modern education, which focuses on external achievements, namely the attributes of material success. Modern education adopted in Western society education causes self-alienation amid capitalist competition, which demands high competition. Based on cognitive achievement, Western education results in several vulnerabilities in mental health issues. Through the temporary monk training, each participant is trained hard to reduce cognitive desires that come from daily habits of clinging to what is called being happy because of having objects in the world, as well as what is called success by achieving a career within the framework of a victory narrative. This education based on detachment in temporary monk training is known as ascetic education and is strongly related to emotional management that supports mental health management.

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