

Spiritual Happiness: A Phenomenological Study of the Congregation Members of the Pengajian Tauhid in Medan City

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Abstract

This study aims to uncover the subjective experience of spiritual happiness among members of the Pengajian Tauhid at Jalan Suluh, Gang Sabir No. 2, Medan City. The research focuses exclusively on participants' lived experiences derived from tauhid teachings as conveyed through lectures by the preacher (mualim). Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study explores the lived experience of both long-standing senior members and younger participants, each bringing distinct life challenges. Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with purposively selected key informants who differed in their duration of involvement in the study circle. Findings reveal four superordinate themes that constitute their spiritual happiness: (1) inner tranquility, (2) emotional stability, (3) discovery of life direction, and (4) the role of the majelis as a protective social identity fortress against negative peer influences. These experiential elements mutually reinforce one another, producing a holistic lived experience. Participants describe spiritual happiness as a profound sense of peace accompanied by a firm conviction that Allah will always provide a "way out" from every life difficulty. The study concludes that tauhid-centred religious study circles can serve as powerful spaces for cultivating spiritual well-being, offering an authentic expression of life's meaning rooted in Allah that effectively alleviates existential anxiety, fortifies the self against harmful influences, and enables adaptive emotional self-regulation in the face of modern existential challenges.

Keywords: *Kebahagiaan Spritual; Fenomenologi; Pengajian Tauhid*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan pengalaman subjektif kebahagiaan spiritual jamaah Pengajian Tauhid di Jalan Suluh, Gang Sabir No. 2, Kota Medan. Fokus penelitian membatasi pada pembahasan hasil pengalaman dari ajaran tauhid berdasarkan ceramah dari pada pendakwah maupun mualim. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis fenomenologi interpretatif (IPA) sebagai usaha untuk menggali *lived experience* dari perwakilan jamaah tua dan jamaah muda yang masing-masing memiliki persoalan kehidupan, data dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan teknik observasi partisipan dan wawancara mendalam

kepada informan kunci secara purposive berdasarkan orientasi waktu yang berbeda dalam mengikuti pengajian. Hasil menunjukkan terdapat empat super-ordinate themes yang membentuk kebahagiaan spiritual mereka: (1) ketenangan batin (2) stabilitas emosional (3) penemuan arah hidup, serta (4) peran majelis sebagai benteng identitas sosial yang melindungi dari pergaulan negatif. Unsur pengalaman jamaah ini saling menguatkan dan menghasilkan satu pengalaman holistik, subjektivitas pengalaman jamaah menjelaskan dalam merasakan kebahagiaan dengan rasa ketenangan yang mendalam serta keyakinan kuat bahwa Allah akan memberikan arah hidup sebagai “jalan keluar” dari setiap masalah kehidupan. Temuan menegaskan bahwa pengajian tauhid dapat menjadi ruang dalam membangun dimensi *spiritual well-being* yakni ungkapan makna kebahagiaan hidup yang bersumber dari Allah yang mampu mengatasi kegelisahan, membentengi diri dan mengelola emosi pribadi dari masalah eksistensial modern.

Kata Kunci: *Spiritual happiness; Pengajian Tauhid; Phenomenological Analysis*

Introduction

Spiritual happiness has once again emerged as a central theme in the quest of modern humanity (Muttaqin, 2012), particularly amid urban life that offers abundant material pleasures yet frequently leaves a profound existential void (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020). Unlike the concept of hedonic well-being, which is oriented toward pleasure-seeking and pain avoidance, spiritual happiness is understood from a perspective rooted in an ontological relationship with Allah through the deepening of tawhid (monotheism), complete surrender (taslim), and a life orientation directed toward Him. Shahama et al. (2022) assert that deepening monotheistic conviction is one of the strongest predictors of inner peace, emotional stability, and sustained meaning in life—especially among populations who have previously experienced adaptive failure or deviant behavior.

Field observations reveal that one particular religious study circle (majelis pengajian) provides participants with an experiential space to embrace inner emptiness in a non-rigid manner, thereby opening a pathway to the happiness that human beings naturally yearn for. The congregation members come from diverse life backgrounds marked by a wide range of personal struggles, united by a shared desire to find tranquility and happiness without judging one another's individual histories. Within this context, an intriguing phenomenon has emerged: small-scale, informally organized religious gatherings known as Majelis Pengajian Tauhid are actively conducted in a simple mosque setting. These gatherings are community-based, non-discriminatory, and impose no specific membership requirements. The Majelis Pengajian Tauhid serves as a space for spiritual and social rehabilitation, enabling individuals to pursue happiness in both this world and the hereafter. Sessions are

typically led by invited preachers who follow a dynamic, pre-arranged schedule.

The Tauhid Study Circle located on Jalan Suluh in Medan operates as an open forum, welcoming anyone seeking solutions to economic, social, and other life challenges. The content delivered consists of lectures addressing issues of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), legal rulings, and various contemporary life problems, drawn from classical references. Although the delivery is serious in tone, it is consistently enriched with religious teachings wrapped in humor.

Spiritual happiness represents the ultimate hope of the congregation members, especially as contemporary religious reality increasingly reveals a shift in human orientation—from mere ritual fulfillment toward a deeper search for existential meaning (Anahdiah et al., 2025). In the midst of urban societal pressures and psychological demands, individuals face mounting stress, rendering the need for contemplative spaces and inner stability ever more urgent. The tauhid study circle, by emphasizing a direct relationship between the human being and God, offers an experience that is not only religious but also profoundly transformational at affective and existential levels. A phenomenological approach provides an avenue to understand these lived experiences directly from the participants' own perspectives, without reductive moralistic or theological constraints (Rosita et al., 2023).

Previous studies have touched upon pathways to spiritual happiness through practices such as *tirakat mlaku* (Himawanti et al., 2022), happiness as a foundation for family resilience (Dewi, 2024), and the relationship between religion and happiness (Amiruddin et al., 2021). However, the subjective lived experience of spiritual happiness—how participants themselves perceive, interpret, and internalize their inner transformation—remains underexplored, particularly through an interpretative phenomenological lens.

This study aims to uncover the lived experience of spiritual happiness among members of the Pengajian Tauhid Jalan Suluh in Medan, Indonesia, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). By integrating the theological framework of tawhid with the psychology of religion, the research seeks to answer the question: How do congregation members experience, interpret, and appropriate spiritual happiness as a fruit of deepening tawhid within the study circle? The findings are expected to contribute fresh insight into pathways toward spiritual happiness in the modern era and serve as a reference for developing community-based, faith-oriented rehabilitation models.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore the inner experiential structure of congregation members as they discover pathways to spiritual happiness through their involvement in the Majelis Pengajian Tauhid in Medan City. The phenomenological approach was selected because it enables an in-

depth exploration of participants' consciousness and facilitates understanding of how the meaning of spiritual happiness is lived, interpreted, and directly experienced by the congregation members themselves (Ahimsa-Putra, 2012). The research focused on describing subjective lived experience as it is (*wie es ist*), through phenomenological reduction and the extraction of essential meanings from participants' narratives.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with congregation members representing a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were purposively selected and divided into two main categories: long-term senior members who had attended the majelis for many years and younger members who had only recently joined the study circle. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews with participant observation, allowing deep exploration of participants' emotional experiences, spiritual reflections, and psychological dynamics throughout their engagement with the pengajian.

Data were analyzed following the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): verbatim transcription, reading and re-reading, initial noting, development of emergent themes, clustering of superordinate themes, horizontalization of meaning units, and finally the construction of textual and structural descriptions. This systematic process culminated in a composite description that illuminates the essence of spiritual happiness as lived and understood by the congregation members.

Results and Discussion

Overview of the Pengajian Tauhid

The Majelis Pengajian Tauhid, located at Jalan Suluh, Gang Sabir No. 2, Medan, has served as a vital spiritual hub for the local community since its establishment in 2012. It was founded through the initiative of Bapak Jawahir, a respected local figure, who began the majelis in his own home at Jalan Suluh No. 131 in response to the community's deep need for profound religious learning and practical moral guidance. Unlike formal institutional programs, this majelis grew organically from the collective yearning of urban residents to draw closer to Allah through knowledge. In its early years, gatherings were held every Saturday night in a traditional format: recitation of classical Arabic texts (*kitab kuning*), lectures, and open discussion. This timing accommodated the majority of attendees, who were daily wage workers with free time only on weekends. Under the guidance of Drs. Sulaiman Barus, a highly revered local scholar, the majelis rapidly gained social legitimacy and active participation from the surrounding neighbourhood.

Following the passing of Bapak Jawahir in 2014, the majelis faced a major challenge when the original house was sold during family inheritance proceedings. Nevertheless, the spirit of *da'wah* remained undimmed. Bapak Sarbaini, the founder's grandson, assumed responsibility by purchasing a new property at the current location (Jalan

Suluh, Gang Sabir No. 2), which has since become the permanent venue. This relocation marked an informal institutionalisation phase: the majelis retained its flexible management style while gaining stability of place and continuity of activities. Until late 2020, Drs. Sulaiman Barus continued to lead the sessions. After his passing, leadership of the scholarly tradition was passed to his charismatic disciple, Muhammad Irham (widely known as Mualim Irham). Following communal deliberation, the weekly schedule was shifted from Saturday to Wednesday nights to better suit the evolving rhythms of participants' lives, thereby enabling greater attendance by working adults and youth who are often busy on weekends (Tua, 2025).

Sessions are now held every Wednesday at 21:00 Western Indonesia Time at the residence of Bapak Sarbaini and last one to two hours, depending on the congregation's condition. Most participants are labourers and active members of the Prosperity Board (Badan Kemakmuran Masjid, BKM) of Masjid Al-Ihsan. The core curriculum revolves around three pillars of knowledge: tawhid (Islamic theology), fiqh (jurisprudence), and tasawwuf (Sufism). For tawhid, participants study *Awwaluddin Sifat Dua Puluh* and *Ad-Durr an-Nafis* by Syekh Muhammad Nafis al-Banjari. Fiqh is taught from *Fiqh Islam* by H. Sulaiman Rasyid, while tasawwuf is drawn from *Jam' al-Jawāmi'i' al-Muṣannafāt* by Syekh Ismail bin Abdul Muthalib al-Asyi (Tua, 2025). Teaching is highly interactive: Mualim Irham—or occasionally a guest preacher—delivers material in clear, accessible Indonesian, using Arabic terms only sparingly and always providing immediate contextual explanation. Discussions frequently flow freely as participants connect the teachings to contemporary issues, such as Islamic legal dilemmas in modern life or moral challenges in an urban setting.

Beyond weekly study, the majelis serves as a catalyst for socio-religious activities that strengthen community bonds. Celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday (Maulid Nabi SAW), charity for orphans, Ramadan programmes, and collective supplications for ill members are organised at Masjid Al-Ihsan, given that most participants are active BKM members (Tua, 2025). Thus, the majelis functions not only as a space for individual spiritual deepening but also as a driver of communal welfare, forging synergy among knowledge, practice, and social solidarity.

Each session concludes with a communal supplication, followed by simple refreshments—such as green bean porridge, rice, or sweet tea—shared in a warm, familial atmosphere. The majelis operates entirely on self-reliance and voluntary contributions. Operational costs, including food and venue maintenance, are borne primarily by Bapak Sarbaini's family, supplemented by voluntary *infaq* from participants. There is no fixed honorarium for the teacher; tokens of appreciation are offered privately through a handshake at the end of the session (Tua, 2025). This model reflects a living spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) amid urban dynamics, where every member contributes according to ability without pressure.

In its profound simplicity, the Majelis Pengajian Tauhid offers an authentic space for seeking religious knowledge. Such gatherings have long formed part of the Islamic scholarly tradition and continue to flourish in both urban and rural settings across Indonesia. Although many similar circles adopt distinctive names to highlight their regular study activities, they collectively serve as vital channels for the transmission of sacred knowledge and as a powerful attraction for city dwellers. This appeal is widely recognised for its capacity to stir both the inner spiritual life and the social fabric of the community. The space created enables participants to discover spiritual tranquility through the deepening of tawhid while simultaneously strengthening communal ties through shared pious action (Prayogo, 2024). Ultimately, the Majelis Pengajian Tauhid exemplifies the dynamic interplay between faith, religious practice, and contextual adaptation in the urban lives of Medan's residents.

Participant Profile and Background

The Majelis Pengajian Tauhid at Jalan Suluh, Gang Sabir No. 2, Medan, is regularly attended by approximately 30 permanent members. The demographic composition is predominantly male: 16 adults and 12 adolescents, with only two female participants (one elderly and one adult). The study circle is explicitly open to anyone wishing to join, regardless of age, gender, or background. No single group—whether older, younger, male, or female—dominates; all are united in a shared commitment to religious learning. There are no special requirements or preferential treatment; anyone may participate fully according to the established schedule held at Masjid Al-Ihsan (Tua, 2025).

The socioeconomic backgrounds of the congregation are highly heterogeneous. Members include motorcycle-taxi drivers, street vendors, minibus drivers, low-level private-sector employees, small-scale entrepreneurs, university students, and senior-high-school pupils. This diversity generates a rich mosaic of interaction: a minibus driver may engage in deep conversation with a university student about the meaning of tawakkul (trust in God) amid traffic congestion and livelihood uncertainty, while a former drug user openly shares how understanding the divine attributes became an anchor against recurring temptation (Tua, 2025).

The most striking feature is the spiritual history of the majority of adult male participants. In-depth interviews and their own candid disclosures reveal that approximately 80 % have previously engaged in serious deviant behaviour, including alcohol consumption, cockfighting and lottery gambling, and narcotic abuse (ecstasy pills, crystal methamphetamine, and marijuana). Several were once petty recidivists or frequent targets of police raids (Muda, 2025). For them, the majelis has become an existential turning point. Their repentance (tawbah) is not merely verbal but a prolonged transformative process evidenced by radical lifestyle changes: abandoning nightlife, severing ties with former

associates, replacing leisure time with religious study, and gradually restoring personal dignity in the eyes of family and neighbours.

Participants' motivations for regular attendance can be classified into three overlapping layers, search for inner peace and spiritual refuge. For those who have fallen into severe hardship, the tauhid study circle functions as a non-judgmental "soul hospital." Deep understanding of Allah's attributes—particularly Ar-Raḥmān (The Most Merciful), Al-Ghafūr (The Perpetual Forgiver), and Al-Ḥalīm (The Forbearing)—instils a profound sense of re-acceptance despite a dark past. As one participant expressed: "Only here did I realise that Allah loves the servant who returns more than the one who claims never to have sinned" (Tua, 2025).

Moral rehabilitation and identity reconstruction The majelis serves as a gentle space for social reintegration. Individuals once shunned by neighbours are now respected for their diligence in attending the mosque and memorising proofs of tawhid. The process is rarely instantaneous—some still wrestle with residual habits—but consistent attendance generates positive social pressure and collective support rarely found elsewhere (Wahab, 2022).

Deepening of faith as a bulwark against urban turmoil For adolescents and adults without histories of serious deviation, the primary motivation is prevention. They witness firsthand how a robust foundation in tawhid can withstand temptations of drugs, promiscuity, and urban materialism. The study circle thus becomes a "spiritual vaccine" transmitted by parental example rather than mere admonition (Achour et al., 2016).

The majelis's non-formal, non-hierarchical structure greatly enhances its appeal. Muallim Irham never claims absolute authority; he acts primarily as a facilitator who opens the classical texts and allows participants to discover meaning for themselves. Discussions unfold through lively question-and-answer exchanges. Lectures frequently address how divine attributes apply to real-life pressures—such as dealing with loan sharks or adolescent online-gaming addiction. This contextual approach renders tawhid no longer an abstract doctrine but a living teaching that directly resolves everyday problems.

The Subjective Experience of Spiritual Happiness among Congregation Members

Within the context of tauhid teaching, spiritual happiness emerges as a profound existential experience that arises when an individual directly realises that only Allah possesses absolute, independent existence, while everything else is wholly depends upon Him. This experience is not ordinary emotional joy, but a deep sense of "coming home": a heart previously fractured by anxiety, feelings of lack, and fear of the future is restored to wholeness upon witnessing that all causes and effects ultimately rest in Allah's hand (Amiruddin et al., 2021). Spiritual happiness is frequently described as an opening of the breast (inshirāḥ aṣ-ṣadr) and a tranquility born of the firm conviction that "Allah is sufficient for us as a guardian"

(Qur' ān, Āli 'Imrān [3]: 173–174). It entails a profound acceptance of life in this world as a journey that continually deepens one's ma'rifah (gnostic recognition) of Allah's oneness and perfection.

From the perspectives of positive psychology and the psychology of religion, spiritual happiness arising from tauhid teachings can be understood through three primary mechanisms: (1) Tauhid satisfies the fundamental human need for meaning in life, which Viktor Frankl (1963) and later Baumeister (1991) identified as the cornerstone of psychological well-being. (2) Tauhid provides cognitive coherence: when a person becomes convinced that every event lies under the control of an all-wise Allah, the burden of anxiety and guilt is dramatically reduced (Pargament, 2007; Koenig, 2012). (3) Tauhid offers a transcendental secure attachment: Allah's majesty is experienced as an ever-present, ever-listening, never-disappointing Figure—a “safe haven” far more stable than any human attachment (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Yaden et al., 2022).

According to Smith et al. (2009, 2021) and Esat et al. (2021), spiritual happiness, viewed through an interpretative phenomenological lens, is simultaneously three-dimensional: theological, psychological, and social. These dimensions are inseparable and mutually permeate one another within the lived reality of the congregation members.

An interpretative phenomenological approach invites us not to hastily measure or explain this happiness with standardised scales, but rather to listen attentively to how participants themselves describe, interpret, and narrate those transformative moments when their hearts expanded, fear dissolved, and life regained profound meaning after listening to lectures on tauhid. Accordingly, the following sections present the lived experience of spiritual happiness as articulated directly by the congregation members based on in-depth interviews;

Table 1. Super ordinate theme dan main theme

Superordinate Theme	Main Themes (Sub-themes)
Inner Tranquility	Disappearance of anxiety and emergence of stable peace
Emotional Stability	Emotional regulation and acceptance of Allah's decree
Life Direction	Life understood as a journey toward Allah
Social Identity	The majelis as a bulwark against negative influences

Inner Tranquility

The sense of inner tranquility experienced by the congregation is not a form of psychological passivity nor merely the absence of external disturbances. Rather, it is an active condition in which previously burdensome existential anxieties gradually subside and are replaced by a state of peace that is not contingent upon changing life circumstances. Within the framework of religious positive psychology, this condition aligns with the concept of *eudaimonic spiritual well-being* (Pargament, 2007;

Koenig, 2012), namely a form of inner flourishing that emerges when an individual perceives harmony between their lived experience and a transcendent purpose that surpasses personal interests. For the congregants, this transcendent purpose is God as the ultimate reality governing all causal chains, thereby reducing the psychological burden of having to control life independently.

This understanding leads to the process of *religious cognitive reappraisal* (Vishkin et al., 2020), a shift in how one interprets life events. Situations previously perceived as threats—such as financial stagnation, domestic tensions, or uncertainty about the future—are reinterpreted as components of God's broader script, which always contains wisdom. This reappraisal does not produce empty optimism but instead constructs a new interpretive framework that situates life's dynamics under divine providence, thereby stabilizing emotional responses (Vishkin et al., 2016).

On a deeper level, this tranquility reflects the formation of a *secure transcendental attachment* (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The congregants cultivate a secure relationship with God as a transcendent figure who is consistently present, responsive, and sustaining—standing in contrast to human relationships that are fragile and unreliable. The testimonies of congregants who feel calmer after attending the study circle, and conversely experience inner emptiness when distant from the gathering, indicate that the religious assembly functions as a ritual of spiritual attachment restoration. Physical presence in the gathering reactivates the sense of being held under God's watch, calming an emotional system previously sensitive to existential threat.

The anxieties experienced before attending the gathering can be understood through existential phenomenology (Yalom, 1980; van Deurzen, 2012), which interprets anxiety as an expression of alienation, vulnerability before mortality, and the fragility of meaning. The teachings of *tawhid* offered in the assembly provide both an *ultimate rescuer* (Pargament) and an *ultimate meaning* (Frankl), thus reshaping the structure of existential experience in a fundamental way. Tranquility does not arise from the assumption that life becomes easier, but from the lived experience of *being-in-the-world-with-God*, wherein a world once perceived as chaotic, random, and threatening is transformed into an arena suffused with the awareness that God is the Most Compassionate (Dolcos et al., 2021).

Emotional Stability

The emotional stability experienced by the congregants reflects a cultivated capacity to restrain anger or soften sadness, a transformation that unfolds through learning to regulate emotions at the moment they arise and as they dissipate. Prior to developing a more substantive sense of nearness to God, their responses tended to be impulsive and often dominated their entire behavioral landscape: a single remark from a spouse could provoke prolonged anger, a minor financial setback could disrupt sleep for days, and one piece of bad news could diminish

motivation for an extended period. After regularly attending the religious gatherings, however, these reaction patterns gradually shift toward healthier emotional management. Emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness still occur, yet they no longer seize control of consciousness; instead, they become transient experiences that can be observed, soothed, and eventually released.

This transformation illustrates an advanced form of *positive religious reappraisal* (Pargament et al., 2011). The congregants' worldview no longer revolves around an ego easily wounded but is anchored in a tawhidic perspective that frames every situation as an opportunity for spiritual learning. Domestic conflicts that once triggered prolonged anger now subside more quickly because they recall that no trial is given beyond one's capacity to bear. Their mechanisms of emotional regulation no longer depend solely on general psychological techniques but on surrendering control to God—a form of *collaborative religious coping* that has been empirically shown to reduce emotional distress (Riegel & Unser, 2021).

The concept of *ikhlas* they embrace is not passive resignation but an active form of acceptance rooted in the conviction that every event unfolds under divine wisdom. Within Islamic positive psychology (Rothman & Coyle, 2020), such *ikhlas* functions as a meta-emotion, a layer of awareness that arises precisely when negative emotions appear. When anger or sadness surfaces, *ikhlas* provides a gentle reminder that these emotions may be felt yet must not be allowed to dominate, for a greater plan is in motion. From this disposition emerges *emotional equanimity*, an affective balance that enables individuals to maintain their social and spiritual roles even in the midst of significant pressure (Graça & Brandão, 2024).

The inner experiences described by the congregants correlate closely with findings in the neuropsychology of religion (Newberg & Waldman, 2017). The acts of *dhikr* and the continuous contemplation of God's attributes strengthen the neural connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. A deepened conviction that God will provide a way forward reduces the biological tendency to react through the fight-or-flight mechanism and enhances the calm-and-connect response. Several congregants describe this as the emergence of a “new internal brake”—a restraint not formed by sheer willpower, but by a continually renewed sense of trust that spontaneously stabilizes emotional responses.

Life Direction

The experiences of the congregants reveal that the deepest form of spiritual happiness does not lie in the attainment of worldly objectives, but in discovering an unwavering orientation of life—an understanding that every aspect of human existence ultimately returns to God. For them, this conviction expresses the very meaning of living well, a framework that

shapes how they perceive time, interpret events, and understand themselves.

This renewed life orientation emerges through three interrelated layers of understanding. First, the teachings conveyed in the gatherings, particularly from the texts *Awwaluddin Sifat 20* and *Ad-Durr an-Nafīs*, position the human being as *‘abd*—a servant journeying back to God (*rujū’ ilā Allāh*). The world is thus understood as a temporary stop rather than an ultimate destination. This awareness gives rise to what Al-Ghazālī calls *safar ar-rūḥ*, the spiritual journey that unfolds continuously through every deed, test, and daily activity. When congregants testify that life is a path toward God, they are articulating a deeply lived spiritual experience—not merely repeating doctrinal formulations.

Second, within the framework of existential psychology and Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy (1963, 1984), the search for meaning constitutes a fundamental human need, while the absence of meaning often becomes the root of modern suffering. For the congregants, *tawhid* provides an *ultimate meaning* that remains firm and unshaken by changing life circumstances: the final goal is neither material accumulation, social prestige, nor relational intimacy, but God’s pleasure in one’s earthly existence. When a congregant feels an inner emptiness despite material comfort, it reflects a form of *noogenic neurosis*—a suffering born from losing existential direction. Upon hearing that every passing moment is an opportunity to draw closer to God, this emptiness recedes; a life once perceived as circular and directionless transforms into a linear journey with a clear and hope-giving destination.

Third, from the perspective of religious phenomenology (van Deurzen, 2012; Smith et al., 2021), the transformations experienced by the congregants signify a profound shift in their *being-in-the-world*. A world previously perceived as chaotic, threatening, and lacking orientation is now understood as a landscape filled with spiritual signs. Every occurrence—whether pleasurable or painful—is seen as a marker along the journey toward God. This shift represents a *re-orientation of the existential compass*: the inner direction becomes clearer, and suffering is no longer interpreted as a bewildering punishment but as a process of self-refinement. Conversely, happiness is no longer projected onto worldly achievements but discovered in the accuracy of one’s life direction itself (Anli, 2025)

Social Identity

Before joining the tauhid study circle, the social identities of many congregants were shaped by the negative labels imposed by their environment: “*troublemaker*,” “*former addict*,” “*menial laborer*,” “*frequent target of police raids*.” These labels became narratives deeply intertwined with their sense of self, forming dominant stories they rehearsed internally day after day. The study circle functions as a radical process of re-authoring. Within this space, a new narrative is collectively written—one that acknowledges an all-encompassing identity of

servanthood to God as part of a spiritual journey toward attaining divine pleasure. Sitting side by side with congregants of diverse backgrounds fosters a shared emotional posture of mutual self-improvement; individuals who once struggled in similar positions and have now become role models serve as living evidence of possible transformation. The congregants' experiences shift toward reciprocal acceptance, replacing the internalized view of being inherently tainted.

The tauhid study circle acts as a counter-environment against the dominant negative cultural landscape of urban life. Outside, the prevailing social norm is: *"If you do not conform, you are excluded."* Within the study circle, a new norm takes hold: *"If you fall, we lift you; if you are weak, we support you."* The horizontal bonds among congregants (bonding social capital) and the vertical ties with teachers or preachers in the tauhid gathering create a strong relational fabric grounded in the shared understanding that all are servants of God striving toward purification. As the preacher, Mu'allim Irham, often reminds them, if a congregant is absent for a session or two, someone will call or visit—not to judge, but to *"bring them home."* This protective structure is not built from physical walls, but from the felt assurance of *"I have a place to return to,"* a sentiment that renders offers of drugs, street racing, or aimless nights far less appealing.

The congregants carry multiple social roles—father, worker, friend—but one *master status* ultimately governs all other roles when conflicts arise. For them, "student of tauhid" or "servant of God on a spiritual journey" becomes the new master status that replaces older ones such as "former addict" or "troublemaker." When temptation appears, the guiding question is no longer "What benefit does this bring me?" but rather "Does this align with my identity as a student of tauhid?" This spiritual identity possesses remarkable resilience because it is transcendent, rooted in a relationship that connects God's compassion with compassion toward fellow human beings. It becomes the strongest shield precisely when all worldly forms of protection have begun to fracture.

Conclusions

The tauhid study circle ultimately functions as a transformative space that enables the experience of spiritual well-being. The congregants' experiences encompass inner, behavioral, and identity dimensions. Through the internalization of tauhid teachings that orient life toward God as its central axis, the study circle cultivates a stable existential orientation that helps individuals navigate life with reduced anxiety, diminished confusion of purpose, and greater emotional regulation—leading to a calmness that is both attainable and sustainable. Tauhid operates as a psychospiritual mechanism that reorganizes how congregants interpret life events, understand trials, and make moral decisions. Their sense of happiness emerges through intersubjective encounters within a community that accepts, strengthens, and validates their ongoing transformation. As they come to see that their past no longer

determines their worth, and that there exists a safe space to relearn how to become more complete human beings, they experience a renewed sense of lightness, acceptance, and meaning.

The tauhid study circle also serves as a social institution capable of restoring identity and rebuilding support networks often lacking in urban life and contemporary city culture. By fostering a community that welcomes, guides, and watches over one another, the gathering creates a new ecosystem capable of counteracting the negative environments that once shaped them. The identity of being a servant of God who embraces life with sincerity replaces the previous stigmatizing labels and provides a resilient moral foundation when facing temptations or social pressures. Ultimately, this strengthening process enables congregants to become individuals who are more emotionally and spiritually stable, cultivating a sense of happiness toward God's decrees as an expression of acceptance and as a reaffirmation of their life orientation as obedient servants of God.

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