

# The Scope of Religious Practice According to the Buddhist Teachings Perspective

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## Abstract

Religious practice is often a measure for religious believers to determine a person's religiosity. A similar concept applies to Buddhist teachings too. Religious practices are performed as a sign of adherence to the religion. Thus, this study intended to explore the forms of religious practices practised by Buddhists. The analysis confirmed several Buddhist practices such as meditation, reciting mantras, participating in religious activities in the temple, worshipping Buddha, performing prayers, and reading Buddhist scriptures either in scripture, verse or text. The practice conducted can also clear the believer's mind from any form of worldly distraction, create calmness and serenity, foster a responsible attitude towards Buddhist teachings, cultivate compassion, be selfless and always avoid conflict with others. Accordingly, the practices taught by the Buddha applied in life reveal that Buddhists also practice a religious life. Hence, to further strengthen the religious practices taught by the Buddha, Buddhist religious institutions need to play a role in teaching Buddhism so that the believers better comprehend Buddhism's teachings.

Keywords: *religious practices, meditation, prayer ceremonies, Buddhist teachings*

## Introduction

Typically, practice is defined as something done, performed, or worked into a habit. It can also be described as a good deed as a routine done by a person. Meanwhile, religion is defined as the belief in God, His attributes, power, acceptance of His teachings and commands, and belief in the Almighty, such as Islam and Christianity. Besides, religion is also defined as the belief in a deity and others who are worshipped and considered compelling (Noresah Baharom 2005). If the two connotations are combined into one phrase, the terminology of religious practice maintains the meaning of a practice performed based on one's belief in God or teaching accepted by a person. This general connotation may differ from the Buddhist perspective because the Buddhist teachings do not believe in God but acknowledge expressing teachings related to practices based on Buddhist teachings alone. Meng & Boyd-Wilson (2017) reported that practices in the context of Buddhist teachings hold various meanings. The practice of *Swarvakayana* to attain the level of *Arhat* becomes the highest goal in accomplishing good deeds. The principal objective of those who practice *Mahayana* is to become a Buddha. Although *Arhat* and *Buddha* are deemed to have reached 'spiritual enlightenment and keep the same skills, there is no consensus between them in dealing with their emotions, society, and material elements.

## The framework of religious practice

The framework of religious practice in Figure 1 below focuses on the Buddhist perspective. It covers two categories: religious activities and attending religious activities (Idler et al. 2001). Indicators of religious activities include meditation, reciting mantras and participating in religious practice. At the same time, indicators for attending the religious activities include three parts: worshipping the Buddha, performing prayers, and reading Buddhist scriptures. There are still many other practices in Buddhist teachings, but these are among the dominant practices practised by Buddhists (Gao et al. 2019; Lu & Gao 2016; Manohare et al. 2017; Suphamet Yunyasit 2009; Yuen et al. 2016).

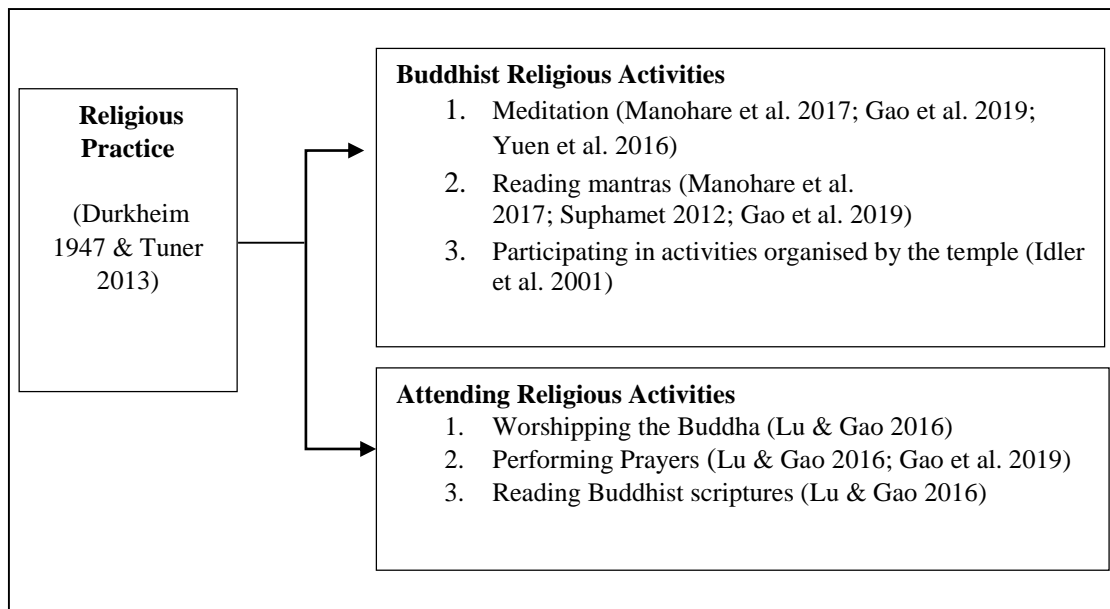


Figure 1 The framework of religious practice

### a. Religious activities

The religious activities proposed by Idler et al. (2001) are meditation, reciting mantras and participating in religious activities. Details of religious activities are as follows:

#### i. Meditation

Meditation is one of the forms of practice attended by Buddhists. This practice is prevalent among adults and the elderly. Meditation is the act of sitting by concentrating one's mind (emotions) on something deeply or the act of contemplating (Noresah Baharom 2005). The definition of meditation in terms of language is a terrible substitute. While in terms of terminology, it means 'Bhavana'. In other words, meditation means 'culture' or 'expansion,' i.e. mental culture or mental development. Meditation also intends to produce a healthy, balanced, and calm mind (Walpolo Sri Rahula 1978).

Meditation is to cleanse the mind from all impurities and distractions such as lust, hatred, wickedness, laziness, anxiety and, restlessness, doubt by cultivating qualities such as focusing, cultivating awareness, boosting intelligence, controlling desire, building confidence, expressing joy, realising serenity to attain nirvana (Walpolo Sri Rahula 1978). Additionally, to achieve clear thinking, believers are always encouraged to strive to create a feeling of mutual understanding and love for each other, encompassing removing anger, violence and deceiving themselves and others (Halimahtul & Jaffary 2015).

Additionally, meditation is also a psychological approach (mental culture), training and purifying the mind. Buddhists practise meditation to cleanse the mind and develop the spirit. To attain the nirvana level or salvation, one will not achieve it without setting the mind through meditation. Buddhists are often reminded that imagination and emotions tend to mislead people if their minds are not appropriately directed. A believer who knows how to meditate will be able to control the mind when deceived by the senses (Holden 2013). This means that meditation can cultivate awareness. Through meditation also, believers can control the emotions and situations that occur in their surroundings. Sound meditation creates a calm mind and benefits themselves as well, as they can also learn spiritual principles by remembering the methods learned clearly (K. S. Dhammananda 1993; Dhammananda 2002b). Accordingly, one meditation type focuses on the development of mental concentration (Samatha or samadhi) from the sharp mind (cittakaggata) by using various methods found in the text toward the highest mystical attainment (Walpolo Sri Rahula 1978).

In terms of attending meditation, the correct position during meditation is also imperative to attain complete mental focus by sitting cross-legged and placing one foot on the other. One can use a chair or pillow to promote comfortable posture and straighten the spine, and discomfort can disrupt a person's thought focus and ultimately prompt unproductivity. The eyelids are lowered but not closed. The tongue is placed behind the upper teeth, and the mouth is closed slightly. Hands are placed on top of each other on the lap (Holden 2013). Similarly, during meditation, the believer cannot speak, signal, look around, write or read, and the position of the hands and body are held in a specific posture, and no individual gets up to go to the bathroom or do stretching. Everything happens in a conducive and controlled atmosphere (Janet McLellan 1993). The trick is to concentrate on breathing (inhale), counting from one to ten as the breath is exhaled. This act is considered 'the focus of one eye'. To complete a particular round of meditation, sit (meditation around 25-30 minutes), followed by walking meditation. Positioning with the back and shoulders straight is paramount to keeping focus. Meanwhile, silent and regular meditation can help calm and focus the mind and boost strength in life throughout the day (Walpolo Sri Rahula 1978).

Meditation can be done all the time and is not restricted to a quiet room without interruption alone. One can do it while working, washing dishes, running, walking, and cleaning tasks. Nevertheless, the most fitting place is in the temple because it is less crowded. Therefore, it is easier to achieve serenity and satisfaction by meditating in an area of less distraction (Ithnapa et al. 2012).

Nonetheless, Foxeus (2015) disagreed with the meditation practice, especially for Buddhists who consider meditation an identity in Buddhist teachings because meditation in a thought-centred way is regarded as a dubious Buddhist identity. This confusion is contradictory as it considers meditation defines an 'authentic' source in Buddhist teachings (Foxeus 2015). Foxeus's (2015) opinion is opposed to Janet McLellan's (1993), who noted that meditation in the West world emphasises the practice of meditation more than reading the scriptures as a religious basis so that the practice of meditation becomes a social activity among Buddhists. Thus, this indicates the gravity of meditation among Buddhists in the West.

Therefore, it signifies the significance of meditation for Buddhists in the West because doing meditation can clear one's mind from any form of distraction of a worldly nature. This is because a person's behaviour stems from his thoughts. Besides, clear thinking is critical to understanding the reality of existence and all things in this universe. If one fails to experience clear thinking, it becomes a source of misery that his life will be tragic and experience the process of rebirth (Rogayah Estar Mohamad 1999a). Thus, meditation will produce ten components: remembrance to Buddha, remembrance to Dhamma, remembrance to *Sangha*, remembrance of manners, remembrance of generosity, remembrance of death, remembrance to the body, and memory of serenity or well-being (Dhammananda 1994; Rogayah Estar Mohamad 1999a).

### **Reciting mantras**

Reading mantras is a prevailing Buddhist practice, especially in countries that practise Theravada Buddhism and use the Pali language to recite it. This sutra recitation was written on ola leaves about two thousand years ago in its early stages. Later, the writings were compiled into a book known as the 'Paritta Chanting Book'. The names of the original books consist of selected sutras such as Anguttara Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Digha Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya and Kuddaka Nikaya in the Pitaka sutras. Buddhists have many options for reciting the sutras and what they want to recite depending on the wishes of the believers and following their ability to recite the sutras. It too relies on their skill of reading the book in an understood language. Reciting mantras is the oldest practice but is still preserved in various languages such as Prakrit, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese (Gao et al. 2019). The recitation of mantras is influential as Dhammananda (2002d) maintained that the mantras recited from some sutras recited by the Buddha in the Pali language are to gain blessings (reward) and protection to the devotees. Most of the sutras recited by Buddhists are to seek protection, known as *Paritta Chanting*. Protection signifies protecting oneself from various forms of evil spirits, calamities and diseases to instil confidence in the mind. Accordingly, reciting mantras for Amitābha Buddha became a belief as a widely used form of religious propagation (Gao et al. 2019).

The mantra is recited repeatedly by repeating a few syllables consisting of the name of the Buddha Amitābha. It is recited silently or aloud as often as possible. At least for a few minutes each day. This ritual can be performed anywhere, in public or during transit, as long as the utterance is done in a focused and confident manner (Gao et al. 2019). The time taken to recite a mantra is about an hour, after which everyone dismisses and returns home (Janet McLellan 1993). The sound of enthusiastic recitation forms an enjoyable atmosphere around it. The rhythm of the recitation is also essential. One may notice that when the monks recite these sutras, the intonation adopted is coordinated with the different sutras according to the place. The rhythm originating from a particular human voice can produce a relaxed atmosphere. Calmness is psychologically substantial to the listener to create a feeling of enthusiasm for the mantra reciter (K. Sri Dhammananda 2002c; Taniyama et al. 2019). This illustrates that reciting mantras is an essential religious practise for Buddhists.

### **Participating in religious practice**

To reveal how the religious life of religion is practised, the temple has a powerful role in disseminating religious teaching. Hence, it proves that the temple keeps a vital function in society to create a religious community, understand the religion and practice it by making various efforts to attract people to participate in activities organised by the institution. The activities are carried out to inspire the active organisation of the institution of worship, such as the temple. These movements translate into religious practices that are considered to earn rewards such as establishing a monastery, becoming a monk, giving money to repair the worship institution or as a gift (*kathina*), giving food to monks daily, taking care of each *uposatha* (place to do tasks related to *Sangha* activities) as well as for Buddhists to do activities that support monks, monasteries and monastic way of life which is considered rewarding (Hun 2010). The management of the temple also plays an effective role in ensuring that its management always highlights peace so that the teachings of Buddhism can be spread throughout the world (Ithnapa et al. 2012). In addition, believers are also encouraged to help manage the organisation of the temple and build higher credibility and trust in the monks (Croog & Levine 1972).

Hence, the leader of Wat Dhammakaya Pra Thepyarn Maha Muni or Luang Pho Dhamma Chayo delivered a speech to the head of the monastery about the temple at Wat Paknam Pasee Chareon, which reads, "... It is difficult to educate people but building a temple is not as difficult as educating people because whoever has their money can build a temple. Thus, the most important thing is that one must educate human beings first". He mentioned the need for a Buddhist temple to educate human beings to be good, i.e. morally good, by practising *Dhamma* (Ithnapa et al. 2012). Voluntary social involvement is also one of the forms of participation in religious activities in the temple. The temple serves as a centre for religious activities due to the facilities available in the temple, such as dining halls, schools, funeral services, a columbarium for the ashes of the deceased and others. Therefore, Robert E. Busswell (2004) posited that religious activities include managing the temple. Among the activities of managing a temple is maintaining its cleanliness (Battaglia 2007).

Nevertheless, Frederick M. Ranallo-Higgins (2019) expressed a different view as he assumed that most of the temples play a part in attracting people, particularly the younger generation and the middle class, to attend it on Wednesday. Among the activities

performed are routine gatherings by holding special rituals, ringing the opening bell, reciting mantras and meditation for about twenty minutes, hymns, meditation, reciting special prayers, reciting scriptures, reciting basic daily practice readings, reciting scriptures as sermons, conducting a question and answer session or responding to a sermon delivered, making an announcement, closing hymn and making an adjournment of the ceremony. They shortened the meeting held on Wednesday afternoon to give more space for meditation and recitation of mantras depending on the situation of the public.

The temple also conducts activities such as holding weekly Buddhist classes, reciting mantras, visiting the temple, holding charity activities to show compassion for the Buddha, and starting and ending weekly classes in Buddhism between 35 to 50 minutes per class (Aristotle C. DY 2013 ). Furthermore, the provision of food to monks is also a voluntary activity done by Buddhists, primarily those who live near the temple, to express their participation in its organisation, such as providing food in turn to the *Sangha* during special occasions such as the New Year or on the anniversary of the death of a loved one, especially for corpses placed in synagogues (Hun 2010).

Consequently, it can create a sense of responsibility for the public in performing religious activities performed by the temple (Jayasinghe 2009). If one shuns the *Dhamma*, one tends to damage or cause many social problems (Ithnapa et al. 2012). Therefore, educating human beings should be a priority in religious life because education built without a spiritual foundation can destroy human social values, unlike instituting buildings, where human material can acquire things. On the contrary, the spirit is developed with good deeds. This effort requires elevated energy and commitment among the believers to do voluntary work in the temple, which is one of the forms of religious practice that can benefit the public and is regarded as practising Buddhist qualities such as compassion, selflessness, and avoiding conflicts with others (Reinke 2018).

The temple serves as a centre for the development of Buddhism for Buddhists to mobilise religious activities and receive religious services, and believers also play a role in providing services to the temple organisation. The believers who attend the temple include patients who come to seek religious services (Croog & Levine 1972). In Buddhism, believers are not obliged to participate in the temple except according to their wishes. Accordingly, distinct social forces may occur for Buddhists and followers of other religions because most Buddhists visit religious places to pray or perhaps because of family traditions or obligations. In contrast, individuals professing other religions visit these places to recognise and learn about the role of other religious institutions (Uemura 2020). Nevertheless, believers also participate in religious activities on matters that benefit them only (Jun 2010; Ismail 1987; Kershaw 1981).

Some of the activities carried out are in stages. The first stage usually involves groups, the second stage typically relates to the public's welfare, and the third stage includes activities involving all division members by holding events such as friendly sports events. The head's responsibility is to manage food and shelter and provide health care and expenses. In an attempt to address each organisational unit, the division head must provide a report to the head for consideration or confirmation and be encouraged to have an exemplary relationship with members. This sound relationship will facilitate the work in managing the organisation. Every organisation should trust the public or women to encourage their contribution either in energy or material. Many people fail to improve organisational performance. In terms of management aspects, each leader has their organisational structure according to the authority of a leader. The activities of each division are done regularly or routinely, whether attended by the head or not, by conducting social activities between members to create a feeling of mutual love and understanding for each other. Therefore, building confidence and reducing tension to a minimum by practising the *Dhamma* is essential for enhancing the progress of a temple organisation (Ithnapa et al. 2012).

## **b. Participating in religious practice**

Usually, one needs to be gauged to determine his religious faith. Participating in religious practice can be defined as attending a temple or any party that organises activities that tend to be either social or religious activities, such as seminars, talks, weekly religious classes and the like, as long as they do activities that can benefit themselves and others. (Chang 1980). Buddhists are more likely to engage in religious activities (Chunping et al. 2016), such as attending religious events, and it is associated with a high level of social integration compared to social support activities that reflect a low level of integration. Attending religious practice can be assimilated into lifelong living as a base for practising religious life. In these phases of life, a person who goes through the adult to the old stage will be independent of the social roles related to family and employment activities (Idler et al. 2001). Hence, the elderly are more likely to attend religious activities organised by Buddhist institutions. Among the forms of activities performed while attending religious activities are as follows:

### **ii. Worshipping the Buddha**

Buddhist worship is one of the most critical forms of practice for Buddhists, but the context of worship holds a different meaning. For instance, worshipping idols means erecting images of unknown gods and goddesses in various shapes and sizes by praying directly to the images as if the image is of a god. At the same time, the prayer is a request to the gods for guidance and protection. The gods and goddesses are asked to bestow health, wealth, and prosperity and provide for various necessities as well as they are also asked to forgive the wrongs committed by a believer. Worshipping Buddha images is a separate matter. Buddhists honour the image of the Buddha as a sign of respect for the greatest, wisest, most kind-hearted, loving and holy human being who has ever lived in this world. Buddhist worship means paying homage and devotion to the Buddha rather than to statues either in the form of stone or metal. Buddhists use statues as symbols and as objects of focus to obtain peace of mind. When Buddhists see pictures of

Buddha, they only think of peace and tranquillity (Dhammananda 2002b). The Buddha is considered a person who contributed immensely to the entire human race.

Usually, Buddhists are considered not idolaters but ideal worshipers. They were obliged to preserve the image of the Buddha in the form of pictures or statues as a sign of respect for the Buddha rather than as idolaters (Dhammananda 2002b). Buddhists never ask for the help of worldly matters from the picture, nor do they ask for forgiveness for evil deeds committed. They also try to control their minds to follow the advice of the Buddha to get rid of worldly suffering and seek refuge for them (Dhammananda 2002b). Buddhists who follow the Theravada sect consider the Buddha personality a supreme teacher (Rogayah Estar Mohamad 1999a). They will pay homage to the Buddha statue every day. Most of them pay homage and worship the Buddha statue twice a day, once in the morning and the evening. At the same time, the statue serves as a motivator to remember the Buddha and as a source of inspiration to follow his example and guidance (Dhammananda 2002b). Accordingly, building statues and worshipping the Buddha accompanied by praying occurred because their beliefs were scaffolded by the image and characteristics of the Buddha according to their imagination (Dhammananda 2002b).

In their minds, a devout Buddhist feels the presence of the Buddha as if still alive. This feeling makes their worship explicit and objective. The serenity of the Buddha's image influences and inspires them to observe the proper behaviour and think (Dhammananda 2002b). For them, individuals who criticise Buddhists for committing idolatry are a misinterpretation of Buddhists. The image of the Buddha is a subconscious element that will permeate deep into the subconscious mind. Thus, by remembering the Buddha, one can produce joy, invigorate the mind and lift one from restlessness, anxiety, tension and frustration. Similarly, worshipping the Buddha does not imply common prayer that asks for something, and it is not idolatry but is defined as 'ideal' worship. Thus, Buddhists can gain new strength to build their lives by seeking inspiration from the Buddhist personality, which is considered noble by imitating one's behaviour. This confirms that they understand that behaviour can purify thoughts, words and deeds. The image of the Buddha is symbolic of his supreme attributes (Dhammananda 2002b).

This, hence, establishes that the Buddha did not attain the highest enlightenment by merely praying, worshipping or adoring supernatural beings, but the Buddha attained enlightenment by purifying his mind and heart through his efforts. To compensate for the bad karmic reactions that have been accumulated before, the believer should do deeds that can benefit and purify the mind, not just relying on worship alone but performing rituals or torturing the body (physical) to overcome the effects of karma. Therefore, a person can overcome the consequences of his evil deeds if he takes wise action by living a dignified life (Dhammananda 2002b).

### iii. Performing prayers

Prayer is not an obligation that one must perform to calm the conscience but an act of worship regarded as the most comprehensive way to communicate with God. Consequently, prayer is also a binding and important obligation and must be borne as a responsibility that has certain conditions to seek God's help (Bounds 2004). The concept of prayer introduced by Bounds (2004) is different from the teachings of the Buddha. For him, the eightfold path taught by the Buddha is the most organised and structured because, in the teachings of Buddhism, one cannot obtain anything desired by just worshipping. It must be through a diligent effort to control their minds to eliminate selfish desires and emotions to attain perfection (V. Dhammananda 1994).

In Buddhist teachings, believers are considered to have power over themselves. This means that the religious life of a Buddhist is self-determined, not decided by events or other unknown forces. It exists naturally, which is just and cannot be altered by prayer. In Buddhist teachings, prayer is a form of meditation that concentrates on self-transformation, which means renewing, examining and enhancing something naturally, and through it, the believer will become what they think (K. S. Dhammananda 1993). The following is a Buddhist poem about the need for prayer in Buddhist teachings "... do not pray for protection from danger but dare to face it. Do not beg to soothe the pain but be prepared to overcome it. Do not hope that anxiety and fear disappear but be patient to win freedom" (Dhammananda 1993).

The Buddhist poetry about prayer above proves that prayer is not the critical element in determining the religious life of Buddhists. Instead, it is self and mental preparation that matters by concentrating on what is thought to face any probability is more crucial than prayer. Nonetheless, prayer serves as a reflection of improved self-esteem gained through self-imposed goodness (Lu & Gao 2016), and if believers are aware of the worth of prayer, they will pray for blessings and protection (Robert E. Busswell 2004).

The tradition of Buddhist prayer is found in the *Tripitaka*. In addition, prayer in the teachings of the Buddha is encouraged by the Buddha to his followers. This practice has been a hereditary tradition for Buddhists to perform the prayer, so it has become a routine practice until now. When executing the prayer ceremony, must maintain behaviour and ethics such as not wearing shorts, turning off communication devices and being in a safe and quiet atmosphere. One can do the act of prayer alone or in groups, whether done by singing, dancing, or reading the Buddhist scriptures, through formal statements and a spontaneous speech from the person praying (Safari Maulidan 2016). This substantiates that the ways and behaviours of prayer differ in terms of words, practices that are structured with specific body movements and positions that religious believers widely practice according to their respective religious traditions and practices (Morgan 2016). For example, one can examine the religious atmosphere and diversity of religious beliefs in Japan, where 69% of respondents claimed they often visit the temple during holidays. Around 54% admitted they visit the temple to perform prayers when facing tricky and challenging times. This indicates that the prayers performed by religious believers are according to the needs and situations met. This verifies that religious believers will resort to religion when faced with problems in life and after having no other choice. This situation will lead to a complex moment for the believer who leaves his religion but seeks it after finding a dead end (Miller 2008). Accordingly, the terminology of prayer is more popular among the followers of the *Mahayana* stream, while *Puja* is more widely used in the *Theravada* stream. It is translated as a form of religious activity to establish

a relationship with God, Goddess, spirit or supernatural power that is worshipped. Although there is no God in Buddhism, prayers are performed to emulate the Buddhist struggle, which has to do with repentance, respect, glorification, and the love of all beings (Safari Maulidan 2016).

#### iv. Reading Buddhist scriptures

For Buddhists, it is their responsibility to know the sutras as a whole. However, because they have many scriptures that need to be read, most believers read some of the scriptures and semi-functional instead of reading the complete books (Robert E. Buswell 2004). In the context of the study of Buddhism, reading or reciting verses of the Sutta needs to be read with deep understanding. It will not make sense to just read the book without appreciating and understanding what is contained. For instance, a boy may be able to recite and learn the four noble truths quickly, but it takes a long time to understand them. Therefore, the Buddha underscores the great essence of proper understanding in comprehending the Buddhist scriptures so that what is read can be understood in the true sense, as happened in the West, where the first group to become Buddhists consisted of scholars and intellectuals. This is because the *Dhamma* is not easily understood by ordinary people and can only be learned by those who can read Eastern languages. The impact of the expansion of learning by the intellectuals occurred within a few years. Buddhists were able to read the Buddhist scriptures in their mother tongue due to the intellectuals' efforts to translate the Buddhist scriptures to facilitate the study of the *Dhamma* by Buddhists in the West (Bikkhu Anoma Mahinda 2009).

In an attempt to explain the characteristics of religiosity in Buddhism, Janet McLellan (1993) shared her experience of how she never understood and informed nobody explained to her about the sutras read, so she felt this was the factor where some Japanese Buddhists converted to Christianity. This is because they cannot understand the teachings of the Buddha in depth. This situation signifies how weak their level of religiosity is in understanding the teachings of Buddhism but return to Buddhism after understanding it. This demonstrates that understanding teaching is imperative so that one can genuinely attend the practice. Accordingly, as described by Buddhist practitioners Di (2018), who discussed a common practitioner (Jim) at Lotus Temple, who stated that the approach he practised was 'reading Buddhist scriptures at home' and 'finding reliable online sources' for a source not available in his temple. By considering whether the sources obtained from the line are 'good and reliable', he will decide hence explore different interpretations of Buddhism by trusting his assessments to determine which ones can be trusted to construct an individualistic identity. Scripture reading also serves as one of the probable strategies to overcome or deal with life stress, either to restore health or when faced with the crisis of low socio economic status and affecting psychological needs (DeAngelis et al. 2018).

#### Conclusion

Ergo, religious practices in Buddhist teachings confirmed that the religious practices taught by the Buddha could benefit Buddhists whether for the mental, spiritual or ethical growth of a Buddhist. The Buddha also underscores the aspect of spiritual development rather than material because practising Buddhism's teachings can be a medium to overcome the problems of life.

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