

A Comparative Analysis of Buddhist Asceticism and Islamic Zuhud: Philosophical Foundations and Contemporary Relevance

¹ Muhammad Fajar Amin, ² Syamsul Hadi Untung

^{1,2} Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: aminfajar695@gmail.com¹, syams.untung@unida.gontor.ac.id²

Article Info :	ABSTRACT
Accepted: 05-02-2026	Background; Modern society is increasingly characterized by materialism and consumerism, which often lead to a spiritual crisis and a loss of meaning in life. In response, Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud are often proposed as ethical alternatives. However, both are frequently misunderstood as purely anti-worldly or escapist doctrines. Objectives: This study aims to analyze and compare the conceptual and philosophical foundations, as well as the ethical and social implications, of asceticism in Buddhism and zuhud in Islam. Method: It employs a qualitative library research method with a comparative-analytical approach, examining primary scriptures and relevant academic literature.
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Keywords: ascetism; buddhism; zuhud; islam; comparative spirituality	Result: The findings show that although both traditions emphasize self-control, they differ in their ontological foundations. Buddhist asceticism represents a non-theistic path toward liberation from suffering (dukkha). In contrast, Islamic zuhud is a theocentric practice that prioritizes the hereafter without neglecting worldly responsibilities. In practice, Buddhist asceticism tends to be institutionalized within monastic life, whereas zuhud functions as a flexible inner attitude applicable across social roles. Conclusion: This study concludes that both concepts offer a corrective framework against modern materialism and provide spiritual pathways toward a balanced and meaningful life. Implication: These findings contribute to interfaith dialogue and deepen the understanding of comparative spirituality.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of asceticism is a pivotal theme in the study of world religions, particularly within religious traditions that prioritize self-control, detachment from worldly ties, and the search for life's meaning as the core of spiritual teachings. In this context, both Buddhism and Islam possess prominent concepts of ascetic practice, despite emerging from different theological, anthropological, and cosmological frameworks. Buddhism identifies asceticism as a path to liberation from suffering (dukkha) through moral discipline, meditation, and wisdom (Divino, 2023). Meanwhile, Islam

introduces the concept of zuhud as an internal disposition that positions the world proportionally without denying man's active role within it (Ismailovna, 2022). These two concepts are often oversimplified as anti-worldly attitudes, whereas, in their original practice and doctrine, Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud possess far more complex and contextual meanings.

The urgency of this research is amplified amidst the realities of modern life characterized by materialism, consumerism, and a crisis of meaning. Various socio-religious studies suggest that an increasing orientation toward material values is often associated with higher levels of anxiety, social inequality, and a decline in spiritual awareness ([Bauman, 2007](#)). In this context, the concepts of asceticism and zuhud are frequently proposed as ethical and spiritual alternatives to foster a balance between material needs and inner well-being ([Shrum et al., 2022](#)). However, public understanding of these concepts remains partial and normative. They are often misunderstood as doctrines that entirely reject worldly life ([Fahrurrozi et al., 2024](#)). This condition highlights the need for a deeper, comparative, and critical academic inquiry to better understand the substantive meanings of Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud in a more proportional and contextual manner.

A number of previous studies have discussed asceticism in Buddhism from historical, philosophical, and monastic practice perspectives, as well as studies on zuhud in Islam from the viewpoints of Sufism, Islamic ethics, and the history of classical scholarly thought ([Anshori et al., 2021](#)). These studies generally emphasize the normative aspects and internal praxis of each respective religion. Initial reviews of the literature show that Buddhist asceticism is most often associated with monastic life and the attainment of Nirvana through the total relinquishment of desire, while zuhud in Islam is understood as an inner attitude of being unattached to the world despite remaining active in social life ([Astuti, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, studies that specifically bring these two concepts together in a single comparative analytical framework remain relatively limited.

The gap analysis in this research lies in the lack of studies comparing Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud conceptually-philosophically as well as practically-ethically through a cross-religious approach. Most prior research tends to stand within one specific religious tradition or compares them descriptively without exploring the ontological differences, spiritual goals, and social implications of the two concepts. Furthermore, few studies have placed asceticism and zuhud as religious responses to universal human problems, such as suffering, attachment, and the search for true happiness ([Asad, 1993](#)). This gap forms the basis for the necessity of this research.

Based on this gap, the novelty of this research lies in the effort to present a comparative analysis that not only highlights terminological similarities and differences between Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud but also examines the philosophical foundations, spiritual goals, and socio-ethical implications of both concepts. This study takes a position to support and expand upon previous research by correcting reductive understandings that equate asceticism and zuhud with absolute anti-worldly attitudes. Through a comparative-analytical approach, this research seeks to demonstrate that Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud are two different models of spirituality in their theological foundations, yet both offer a critique of the dominance of materialism and provide an ethical framework for a more meaningful life ([Clooney, 2010](#)).

In this context, the concepts of asceticism and zuhud are frequently proposed as ethical and spiritual alternatives to foster a balance between material needs and inner well-being. However, public understanding of these concepts remains partial and normative, and they are often misunderstood as doctrines that entirely reject worldly life. Previous studies have generally examined Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud in isolation, with limited attention to their comparative philosophical foundations and socio-ethical implications in contemporary contexts.

This indicates a gap in the literature, particularly in addressing their relevance to modern materialism. Therefore, this study offers a comparative and critical analysis of both traditions, highlighting their distinctive ontological bases and practical orientations as well as their potential contribution as alternative ethical frameworks in responding to the spiritual crisis of modern society.

Consequently, the primary objective of this article is to comprehensively analyze and compare the concept of asceticism in Buddhism and the concept of zuhud in Islam, as well as to explain their relevance in the context of modern human life. This study is expected to provide an academic contribution to religious studies, particularly in enriching the discourse of interfaith dialogue and the understanding of comparative spirituality ([Hidayat, 2019](#)); Anshari & Nasution, 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative design using a library research approach ([Krippendorff, 2018](#)). This approach is appropriate because the objects of analysis asceticism in Buddhism and zuhud in Islam—are derived from religious texts, classical works, and contemporary academic literature. It

enables an in-depth and contextual understanding of the meanings, values, and conceptual constructions of both traditions ([Marshall & Rossman, 2014](#)).

The use of library research is grounded in the normative, doctrinal, and philosophical nature of the subject. Both Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud have developed through textual traditions, interpretive practices, and the intellectual contributions of religious scholars. Therefore, textual and literary analysis is considered the most relevant method.

Data sources are categorized into primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include key Buddhist scriptures, particularly the Tripitaka (Vinaya and Sutta Pitaka), as well as Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Sufi texts on zuhud. Secondary sources consist of academic books, journal articles, dissertations, and previous studies related to asceticism, spirituality, and comparative religion. These sources are used to support analysis, expand perspectives, and situate this study within existing scholarship. Data were collected through systematic documentation and literature review. Relevant texts were identified, examined, and classified according to key themes, including definitions, spiritual goals, philosophical and theological foundations, and ethical implications ([Saldaña, 2021](#)).

Data analysis combines descriptive and comparative techniques. Descriptive analysis is used to present each concept systematically, while comparative analysis identifies similarities and differences in their ontological foundations, spiritual aims, and attitudes toward worldly life ([Clooney, 2010](#)). The analysis follows an inductive approach, drawing conclusions from the conceptual patterns identified in the data.

To ensure validity, this study applies source triangulation by comparing multiple primary and secondary references on similar themes. Careful textual interpretation and the use of authoritative academic sources are employed to minimize bias and enhance reliability ([Flick, 2022](#)). This research focuses on a conceptual and comparative examination of asceticism in Buddhism and zuhud in Islam, particularly their philosophical foundations, spiritual objectives, and relevance in addressing the challenges of modern life ([Asad, 1993](#)).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The concept of asceticism in Buddhism and zuhud in Islam represent two forms of spirituality born from different religious traditions, yet both are oriented toward self-control and the search for a higher meaning in life. Although often perceived as teachings that distance humans from the world, the results of the literature analysis indicate that these two concepts possess more complex theological, philosophical, and practical nuances. This

discussion examines in depth the concept of asceticism in Buddhism, the concept of zuhud in Islam, and a comparative analysis between the two to affirm their positions and relevance within the context of modern life.

Asceticism in the Buddhist Perspective

In Buddhist teachings, asceticism is closely related to the effort of liberating humans from suffering (dukkha). Historically, Siddhartha Gautama underwent extreme ascetic practices before achieving enlightenment. However, that experience actually gave birth to a critique of excessive asceticism and laid the foundation for the teaching of Majjhima Patipada or the Middle Way. Thus, asceticism in Buddhism is not interpreted as self-mortification, but rather as a life discipline emphasizing simplicity, the control of desires, and detachment from craving (tanha).

Buddhist asceticism is systematically manifested in monastic life through the Vinaya rules, which regulate diet, ownership, social relations, and moral discipline (Gombrich, 2006). This practice aims to create mental conditions conducive to the development of meditation (samadhi) and wisdom (panna). The detachment from worldly desires is not nihilistic; rather, it is directed toward understanding the nature of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta) (Bodhi, 2010). Consequently, Buddhist asceticism serves as an ethical and psychological means to achieve enlightenment and inner freedom.

In a social context, Buddhist asceticism does not entirely separate itself from society. Monks continue to interact with the laity through the practice of dana (almsgiving), creating a reciprocal relationship between spiritual and social life. This demonstrates that Buddhist asceticism possesses a social dimension that functions as a moral and spiritual example for the broader community (Irawan & Widjajanti, 2023).

Zuhud in the Islamic Perspective

Zuhud in Islam is an ethico-spiritual concept deeply rooted in the Qur'an and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (Fahrurrozi et al., 2024). Terminologically, zuhud does not mean physically abandoning the world, but rather releasing the heart's attachment to it. The world is viewed as a means, not the ultimate goal. Therefore, zuhud emphasizes a balance between worldly life and an orientation toward the hereafter.

In the Sufi tradition, zuhud is understood as the initial stage in the spiritual journey toward closeness to Allah (Milani, 2024). Classical scholars and Sufis assert that zuhud is not poverty or social passivity, but rather an inner attitude that makes divine values the center of one's life orientation

([Mahmoudi et al., 2022](#)). An individual may continue to work, possess wealth, and play an active role in society, provided their heart is not enslaved by such possessions.

Zuhud also carries strong ethical and social implications. A non-excessive attitude toward the world gives rise to social justice, concern for others, and moral responsibility. In Islamic history, many zuhud figures were actively involved in education, governance, and da'wah (proselytizing). This confirms that zuhud is not a teaching of escapism, but a grounded and transformative form of spirituality ([Hidayat, 2019](#); [Irawan, 2022](#)).

Comparative Analysis of Buddhist Asceticism and Islamic Zuhud

Conceptually, Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud share a common ground in the effort toward self-control and the critique of excessive attachment to the world (Sharpe, 1986). Both view desire as the source of spiritual problems that prevent humans from achieving true happiness. However, fundamental differences lie in the philosophical foundations and the ultimate goals of these practices.

Buddhist asceticism originates from a non-theistic framework and is oriented toward liberation from the cycle of suffering through enlightenment. Worldly detachment is performed to achieve inner freedom and full awareness of reality ([Asad, 1993](#); [Lala, 2023](#)). Meanwhile, Islamic zuhud is based on the theology of Tawhid (monotheism) and aims to draw closer to Allah. Worldly detachment in Islam is not ontological but ethico-spiritual, namely regulating human relations with the world according to God's will.

In terms of praxis, Buddhist asceticism is more institutionalized within monastic life, whereas Islamic zuhud is more flexible and can be practiced by anyone across various professions and social roles ([Clooney, 2010](#)). This difference indicates that Buddhist asceticism tends to be structural, while Islamic zuhud is individual and moral-spiritual.

These findings strengthen the position of this research, which supports and corrects previous studies. This study supports the view that both concepts teach simplicity and self-control, yet it corrects the reductive understanding that equates asceticism and zuhud with a total rejection of the world. Instead, both are contextual and relevant spiritual models for addressing the problems of modern materialism.

Relevance in the Context of Modern Life

In the context of modern life, characterized by consumerism and spiritual crisis, Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud offer alternative ethical frameworks emphasizing balance, self-awareness, and life meaning ([Bauman,](#)

2007; [Mulyani, 2025](#)). These two concepts can function as internal religious critiques of a life orientation focused excessively on matter and as a source of values for the development of interfaith spirituality.

Thus, asceticism and zuhud are not only relevant as normative religious teachings but also as universal ethical discourses that can contribute to building the character of modern humans who are more conscious, just, and purposeful ([Asad, 1993](#)).

CONCLUSION

Buddhist asceticism and Islamic zuhud are two distinct yet complementary spiritual traditions that share a common orientation toward self-control and detachment from worldly excess, while differing in their philosophical foundations the former being non-theistic and oriented toward liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) through the Middle Way, and the latter grounded in Tawhid theology and aimed at drawing closer to Allah through an ethical inner disposition.

Neither concept constitutes escapism or a denial of life; rather, Buddhist asceticism offers a psychological and ethical path to inner freedom, while zuhud positions the world as a means rather than an end, permitting active social engagement. Both traditions provide a meaningful critique of modern materialism and consumerism, and their comparative study contributes to interfaith dialogue and the development of a more balanced, humanistic, and contextual understanding of spirituality.

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