

## Lived Meaning of Qur'anic Reflection in Spiritual Transformation among Pesantren Students

Inong Satriadi

Universitas Islam Negeri Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, Indonesia

[inongsatriadi@uinmybatusangkar.ac.id](mailto:inongsatriadi@uinmybatusangkar.ac.id)

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### ABSTRACT

Islamic education increasingly emphasizes not only doctrinal knowledge but also the cultivation of personal spiritual awareness through reflective engagement with sacred texts. Within this context, tadabbur al-Qur'an—the contemplative reflection on the Qur'an—has become a significant practice for nurturing inner transformation among students in modern pesantren. However, little is known about how these students subjectively experience spiritual change through tadabbur, prompting the question: how do students internalize and make meaning of the Qur'an in ways that shape their spiritual identity? This study applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of pesantren students who engage regularly in tadabbur al-Qur'an. Using semi-structured interviews with eight participants, the study identified key themes of inner awakening, emotional realignment, ritual reinterpretation, and sustained spiritual discipline. The findings reveal that tadabbur functions not only as a cognitive exercise but as a deeply personal and transformative spiritual process shaped by students' social and emotional contexts. The results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of spirituality as a lived and evolving experience within Islamic education. These insights support the integration of reflective Qur'anic practices into educational settings and open pathways for further exploration of subjective spiritual development across diverse religious learning environments.



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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Islamic education, particularly within modern pesantren institutions, there has been a revitalized emphasis on nurturing not only cognitive understanding of religious texts but also the development of personal spiritual awareness. Tadabbur al-Qur'an, or reflective contemplation of the Qur'anic message, has emerged as a central practice aimed at fostering such spiritual depth. This practice goes beyond memorization or exegesis; it invites individuals into an intimate engagement with the divine text, prompting internal reflection and existential awareness rooted in the verses of the Qur'an.

In the broader social context, young Muslims—especially those in structured religious environments such as pesantren—are navigating complex spiritual journeys amid rapid societal changes, digital distractions, and identity negotiations. For these students, tadabbur serves not merely as a religious obligation, but as a channel for experiencing spiritual anchoring and emotional coherence. Through reflective practices, students seek meaning, clarity, and connection in their faith amidst modern educational and social pressures. As highlighted by Fatimah (2022), urban youth often engage in Qur'anic reflection not only for doctrinal reinforcement but to find existential resonance and personal moral direction. Despite growing interest in the role of tadabbur, existing research has not sufficiently explored how pesantren students subjectively experience this practice in their spiritual development.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how tadabbur al-Qur'an shapes the lived spiritual transformation among pesantren students by addressing the following research question: How do pesantren students internalize and make meaning of tadabbur al-Qur'an in relation to their spiritual identity? The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its inherently experiential and transformative nature. Spiritual transformation, as perceived and lived by individuals, cannot be fully captured through textual

analysis or behavioral observation alone. Instead, it requires an exploration of the inner world—how sacred texts are internalized, emotionally processed, and embodied in everyday life. For students immersed in Qur’anic environments, their encounters with verses often carry deeply personal meanings that shape their identity, emotions, and ethical orientations.

Given the inherently subjective and dynamic dimensions of such experiences, a phenomenological approach becomes essential. Rather than merely describing external behaviors or institutional programs, this study seeks to explore the lived meaning of spiritual transformation through *tadabbur al-Qur’an*. It responds to the need for deeper, first-person understandings of how sacred texts influence consciousness and being—insights that are often obscured in quantitative or doctrinal studies. By focusing on the inner landscape of students engaged in reflective Qur’anic contemplation, the study aligns with the phenomenological imperative to uncover the essence of human experience in its fullest depth and context.

Within the growing body of scholarship on Islamic spiritual practices, the study of lived experiences—especially among students immersed in religious environments—has emerged as a critical area of inquiry. Exploring how individuals engage with the Qur’an not merely as text, but as a source of personal transformation, offers insights into the subtle interplay between sacred revelation and human subjectivity. In particular, the experiences of pesantren students who regularly practice *tadabbur al-Qur’an* represent a valuable site for examining how spiritual meaning is internalized and expressed.

However, despite the growing interest in Islamic spirituality, much of the existing research remains anchored in normative, textual, or doctrinal frameworks. Quantitative approaches and structured theological interpretations often fall short in capturing the depth and nuance of individual spiritual experiences. These methods, while valuable for broader generalizations, are not well-suited to uncovering the complex emotional, cognitive, and existential dimensions that characterize spiritual transformation. As Ahmad (2019) noted in his phenomenological study of young converts, rich spiritual experiences are often diluted or overlooked when analyzed through impersonal or rigid methodologies.

Methodological limitations further constrain our understanding of how Qur’anic reflection affects the inner life of practitioners. Studies that rely on behavioral indicators or institutional outcomes tend to miss the deeply personal processes by which individuals interpret, wrestle with, and embody divine messages. Consequently, these approaches fail to grasp the essence of the phenomenon: the evolving and profoundly human experience of being spiritually reshaped through the Qur’an.

In this light, phenomenology provides a methodological alternative that is both necessary and timely. Its emphasis on subjective meaning, contextual awareness, and first-person narratives allows for a more faithful representation of the spiritual journeys students undergo. By focusing on how *tadabbur* is experienced—rather than simply how it is taught or performed—this study addresses a critical gap in the literature and responds to the methodological challenge of understanding spirituality from within.

Existing responses to the spiritual development of students in Islamic boarding schools have predominantly relied on practical frameworks such as structured curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and motivational programs aimed at strengthening religious identity. While these interventions have institutional merit, they tend to emphasize observable behaviors and ritual compliance rather than probing the internal spiritual dynamics that shape students' lived religiosity.

Moreover, prior studies in the context of pesantren have often prioritized doctrinal fidelity or measurable religious outcomes, employing surveys or content analyses to assess students' spiritual engagement. These approaches, although informative, are insufficient for capturing the deeply personal and subjective experiences that accompany spiritual transformation. As Yusuf (2021) highlighted, the emotional and existential depth emerging from *tadabbur al-Qur’an* cannot be adequately represented through quantitative indicators alone. The result is a superficial understanding of what it means to be spiritually transformed through the Qur’an.

These methodological constraints underscore a critical gap in current scholarship: the absence of a nuanced understanding of how students internalize, interpret, and embody the Qur’anic message through sustained reflection. Without exploring how students themselves articulate the meanings they derive from *tadabbur*, research risks reducing spirituality to institutional outputs, neglecting the inward experiences that define genuine transformation.

Phenomenology, therefore, offers a powerful alternative by centering the voices of those undergoing the experience. Its emphasis on lived meaning and first-person narratives enables the exploration of spiritual transformation not as a theoretical abstraction, but as a complex, emotionally textured, and contextually embedded process. By applying this approach, the present study seeks to illuminate aspects of tadabbur al-Qur'an that remain hidden within conventional frameworks, offering a more holistic and authentic understanding of how the Qur'an shapes the inner lives of students.

Several studies have examined how religious texts influence spiritual awareness, particularly among youth in Islamic educational contexts. Fatimah (2022) explored how urban Muslim youth reflect on Qur'anic verses to make sense of their moral identity, while Ahmad (2019) investigated how young converts experienced transformation through personal engagement with the Qur'an. These studies emphasize the importance of personal meaning-making, yet they often lack depth in describing the internal dynamics of that transformation. Most rely on narrative summaries or thematic categorizations without a sustained phenomenological inquiry. As such, the specific inner processes experienced by students in pesantren during tadabbur al-Qur'an remain underexplored.

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how pesantren students experience spiritual transformation through Qur'anic reflection. IPA is selected because it captures the emotional, existential, and interpretive dimensions of human experience, particularly in spiritual contexts. The method allows for detailed exploration of how meaning is constructed and lived. By using this approach, the study directly addresses the knowledge gap identified earlier—specifically, the need to understand spiritual transformation as experienced from within. The voices of students are prioritized to reveal how they internalize the Qur'anic message in a structured religious environment.

The article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the general and specific background of the phenomenon and establishes the research gap. The methodology section describes the phenomenological framework, participant selection, and data collection procedures. The results section presents the lived experiences of participants based on thematic analysis. Finally, the discussion connects these findings with existing literature and reflects on the implications for Islamic education and spiritual development.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived spiritual transformation experienced by students in a modern pesantren through the practice of tadabbur al-Qur'an. Phenomenology was selected as the research design due to its capacity to uncover the depth of meaning embedded in personal experiences. The interpretative variant of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was applied to examine how participants interpret and make sense of their encounters with the Qur'anic text in a spiritual context.

This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how tadabbur influenced the internal states and existential perspectives of the participants, beyond observable behavior or external religious practices. Through the interpretative lens, attention was given not only to what was experienced, but also to how it was made meaningful within the unique socio-religious setting of a pesantren.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of students enrolled in a modern Islamic boarding school (pesantren modern) in Indonesia, known for incorporating Qur'anic reflection practices as part of its spiritual curriculum. The selection of participants followed purposive sampling strategies, focusing on individuals who had consistent and reflective engagement with tadabbur al-Qur'an for a minimum period of six months.

Inclusion criteria involved students aged between 18 and 24 years who demonstrated voluntary interest and emotional articulation regarding their spiritual experiences. Those with limited exposure to tadabbur or lacking sufficient verbal reflection skills were excluded from the study. A total of eight participants—five male and three female students—were involved. Their average age was 21 years, and all were actively participating in structured Qur'anic reflection sessions held weekly by the pesantren.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face in a private and comfortable setting within the pesantren environment. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit deep reflections on spiritual experiences associated with tadabbur. Follow-up questions were used to clarify and expand on emergent themes.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis. The environment for data collection was intentionally set to minimize distractions and provide emotional safety for participants to express intimate spiritual narratives. A brief demographic form and informed consent document were completed prior to the interview sessions.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a series of systematic steps to identify and interpret essential themes within the participants' lived experiences. The analysis began with close reading of transcripts to identify meaning units, followed by thematic coding, clustering of significant statements, and development of interpretive themes that reflected the spiritual transformation process.

A qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was utilized to assist in the organization and management of coded data, although interpretation remained grounded in manual thematic synthesis. Themes were constructed iteratively and validated through repeated reference to original transcripts to ensure alignment with the authentic voice of participants. The analytic process emphasized the discovery of both shared patterns and unique expressions of transformation across individual narratives.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the affiliated university. Written informed consent was provided by all participants after being informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and by securely storing all data. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local regulations governing research involving human subjects.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the phenomenological findings derived from in-depth interviews with students from a modern pesantren who have engaged in the reflective practice of tadabbur al-Qur'an. The themes identified illustrate the essential meaning and transformation that the participants underwent during their spiritual journeys. The presentation follows a thematic structure that emerged from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), offering a coherent, narrative-driven portrayal of their lived experiences.

**Awakening the Inner Self through Divine Encounter**

Participants consistently described a profound sense of awakening upon engaging in tadabbur. This awakening was not merely cognitive but deeply spiritual, marked by a recognition of the self in relation to the Divine.

"It felt like the verses were speaking directly to me, reminding me who I truly am—not just a student, but a servant of Allah. I started seeing myself differently." (P3)

This spiritual awakening often came unexpectedly, through a verse that resonated with their personal struggles or life circumstances. The act of reflecting deeply on Qur'anic meanings triggered a heightened awareness of purpose and identity.

**Reconstructing Religious Meaning and Values**

Through tadabbur, students reported a transformation in how they understood religious rituals and concepts. What was once routine became infused with meaning and intentionality.

“Before, I prayed because it was an obligation. After tadabbur, I felt that every movement in prayer was a response to the Qur’an’s message. It became more than an act—it became communication.” (P5)

This re-meaning of faith practices reveals a shift from formalistic religiosity toward a more conscious, value-driven spirituality. The verses functioned as a lens through which students reconstructed the relevance of Islamic teachings in their daily lives.

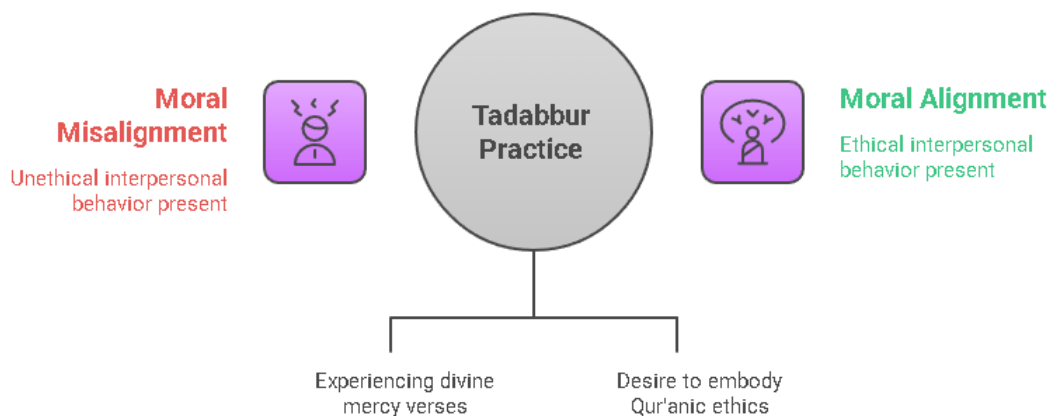
**Emotional Catharsis and Moral Realignment**

Several participants described moments of intense emotional release during tadabbur, especially when encountering verses that spoke of divine mercy, forgiveness, or the fragility of human existence.

“I cried when I read about Allah’s mercy. It was overwhelming... like I had been seen and forgiven. That verse changed how I treated others—I became more forgiving.” (P2)

This emotional resonance catalyzed moral self-correction. The students expressed a desire to embody Qur’anic ethics in interpersonal behavior, marking a realignment of both inner emotion and external conduct.

**Tadabbur for Emotional Release and Moral Growth**



**Spiritual Discipline and Internal Consistency**

Engagement in regular tadabbur developed into a form of spiritual discipline, reinforcing internal stability and consistency. Students articulated how the practice anchored their emotions during times of doubt or fatigue.

“Whenever I felt tired of routines or distant from Allah, I returned to the verses. They grounded me. I started keeping a journal of reflections so I wouldn't lose that feeling.” (P4)

This theme highlights the formation of personalized spiritual habits, showing how tadabbur is integrated into a dynamic process of sustaining iman (faith) and ikhlas (sincerity).

**Collective Reflection and Shared Transcendence**

Though tadabbur is deeply personal, participants often experienced a sense of transcendence when done collectively. Group discussions after reciting verses led to shared insights and reinforced bonds of brotherhood.

“When I heard how my friend interpreted the same verse, it opened my heart. It was like Allah gave us different keys to the same treasure.” (P1)

This social dimension added a communal depth to their spiritual transformation, suggesting that spiritual growth is not only inward but also relational.

The essence of the phenomenon experienced by pesantren students through tadabbur al-Qur'an lies in a transformative journey that integrates inner awakening, redefinition of religious practices, emotional purification, and spiritual discipline. These experiences collectively construct a personal and communal spiritual identity that continues to evolve within the pesantren setting. The findings underscore tadabbur not as a passive act of reflection but as a lived, active engagement with the sacred text, shaping both worldview and behavior.

The findings of this study reveal that students in a modern pesantren experience spiritual transformation through tadabbur al-Qur'an as a deeply personal and multidimensional process. This transformation encompasses awakening of the inner self, emotional realignment, re-meaning of religious rituals, and the development of sustained spiritual discipline—addressing the central research question on how students subjectively experience their spiritual growth through Qur'anic reflection.

These findings contribute directly to understanding the phenomenon of tadabbur as not only a cognitive exercise but as a lived, internal journey of meaning-making. The study offers a rich depiction of how Qur'anic verses become internalized through the lens of personal struggles, hopes, and relational dynamics within the pesantren setting. Unlike prior studies that frame spiritual education through outcomes or dogmatic learning, this research emphasizes the inner landscape—showing how faith is constructed through reflection, rather than instruction. This nuance adds theoretical weight to the phenomenological interpretation of spirituality as something unfolding inwardly, shaped by encounter and resonance with the sacred text.

The results align with and extend earlier work by Ahmad (2019), who observed similar themes of personal transformation among young converts. However, this study expands the context by situating the experience within a structured religious educational institution, demonstrating that institutional environments can foster—not inhibit—deep personal reflection. Moreover, the findings resonate with Fatimah (2022), who highlighted tadabbur as an existential practice among urban youth. Yet, while Fatimah emphasized social belonging, the present study reveals a layered process involving individual moral recalibration, emotional catharsis, and spiritual anchoring. Thus, the findings enrich existing literature by deepening our understanding of tadabbur as a transformative practice embedded in communal yet highly personal educational settings.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The implications of these findings extend beyond the personal narratives of pesantren students and contribute meaningfully to broader discourses on Islamic education and spiritual formation. At a theoretical level, the results reinforce the understanding that spirituality is not merely cultivated through doctrinal transmission, but through experiential engagement with sacred texts that provoke reflection, emotional resonance, and ethical realignment. On a practical level, the findings suggest that pesantren curricula should integrate structured opportunities for tadabbur as a means of nurturing authentic spiritual consciousness. This could reshape pedagogical approaches by placing emphasis on inner reflection and spiritual mentoring, especially for youth navigating faith within modern educational settings. The relevance of these insights is also significant for other Muslim educational institutions seeking to cultivate holistic spiritual development in contemporary sociocultural contexts.

### **Study Limitations**

As with all qualitative research grounded in phenomenology, this study is inherently context-bound and shaped by the specific experiences of the participants. The findings are based on a small sample of students from a single pesantren, which limits the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized to all Islamic educational settings. Additionally, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows for rich individual insights, it relies on the verbal expressiveness of participants, potentially excluding less articulate individuals whose experiences may be equally valuable. These limitations, however, do not undermine the validity of the study; rather, they point to the need for further investigation across diverse contexts and populations to enrich our understanding of tadabbur as a transformative practice.

**Future Research Directions**

Future research could build on these findings by exploring comparative experiences of tadabbur among students in different types of Islamic institutions, such as traditional pesantren, madrasah aliyah, or Islamic universities. It may also be valuable to examine the role of gender, socio-economic background, or digital media in shaping how students engage with and reflect upon Qur'anic texts. Longitudinal studies could further illuminate how spiritual transformation evolves over time, providing a dynamic view of how reflective Qur'anic engagement influences life trajectories. Moreover, expanding phenomenological inquiry into the voices of teachers, mentors, or alumni could uncover how tadabbur is cultivated and sustained as a shared cultural and spiritual practice. These directions would continue to elevate the discourse on lived Islamic spirituality and its relevance in both local and global educational landscapes.

**CONCLUSION**

This study explored how students in a modern pesantren experience spiritual transformation through tadabbur al-Qur'an, addressing the need to understand the inner dimensions of religious development. The findings revealed that tadabbur fosters deep personal awakening, emotional purification, reinterpretation of religious practice, and the cultivation of consistent spiritual discipline. These insights offer a rich understanding of how students internalize the Qur'anic message as a living guide, not merely a doctrinal reference. Theoretically, this research advances the conceptualization of Islamic spirituality by framing tadabbur as a dynamic process of meaning-making that integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, thus bridging gaps between traditional religious knowledge and lived spiritual experience. By focusing on subjective meaning-making, this research fills a critical gap in studies that often neglect the experiential aspects of Islamic spirituality. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) proved effective in uncovering the essence of these spiritual experiences within a structured religious environment. Educationally, the findings underscore the importance of incorporating reflective Qur'anic practices like tadabbur into pesantren curricula to nurture holistic spiritual development. Such integration can support educators in fostering students' resilience, moral reasoning, and emotional well-being, thereby contributing to more robust models of Islamic education that respond to contemporary challenges. Future studies could expand this work by exploring diverse pesantren contexts or examining long-term impacts of tadabbur on personal and communal spiritual growth.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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