



Elderly Reflections on *Qalbun* Study in the Pursuit of Happiness: A Study at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud Segamat Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Old age is a stage of life filled with various challenges—physical, psychological, and spiritual. Many elderly individuals experience feelings of loneliness, a loss of life's meaning, and death anxiety. In this context, the need for inner peace and true happiness becomes increasingly essential. This study aims to explore how older people at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, Segamat, Malaysia, reflect on the study of *qalbun* (the heart) in their pursuit of a meaningful and fulfilling life. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, five elderly informants who actively attended *qalbun* sessions for one month were involved. The findings reveal that *qalbun* studies serve as a transformative reflective process, encouraging emotional healing, spiritual awareness, gratitude, sincerity, and readiness for death. Five central themes emerged: inner peace, the discovery of life's meaning, increased gratitude and sincerity, a redefinition of happiness, and existential readiness for the afterlife. This research affirms that a purified heart (*qalbun Salim*) forms the foundation of true spiritual happiness in old age. The study recommends the development of an *qalbun-centered* counseling model as an applicable and relevant approach for supporting elderly individuals in religious institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of aging is an inevitable part of the human life cycle. At this stage, individuals often face various psychosocial challenges such as loneliness, loss of life purpose, physical decline, and feelings of alienation (Word Health Organization, 2022). The hopes of older people in their later years include the desire to remain healthy and independent and to enjoy life comfortably. They long for inner peace, self-acceptance, and a sense of being valued and having a purpose in life. Social support from family and the community is highly expected to prevent feelings of loneliness. Spiritually, the elderly seek peace and meaning in life through practices such as *dzikir* (remembrance of God) and *qalbun* (heart) reflection.

They also wish to stay engaged in meaningful activities that bring a sense of fulfillment and happiness. Recent studies indicate that loneliness and social isolation among the elderly significantly

contribute to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression (Hajek et al., 2023). Additionally, changes in social roles due to retirement or the loss of a spouse further worsen the psychological condition of the elderly, making them more vulnerable to a decline in their quality of life. These challenges not only affect emotional well-being but also have physical consequences, including increased risk of chronic illness and weakened immune function (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Conditions in various settings show that many elderly individuals experience restlessness, anxiety, and even depression due to the loss of social roles and meaningful relationships, including those related to spirituality (Dewi et al., 2024; Kristian et al., 2023; Redjeki & Tambunan, 2019). Even within religious environments, inner happiness remains a relevant issue. Recent research reveals that although religious settings may offer spiritual support, the elderly can still feel isolated and spiritually unsettled if they lack meaningful social connections (Masruroh & Rahma, 2023). This demonstrates that inner happiness in old age is not solely determined by religious activities but also by the quality of social interaction and emotional support received.

This, however, contrasts with the elderly who choose to live and engage in activities at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, Segamat, Malaysia. This madrasah provides an intensive environment for spiritual activities, particularly Islamic studies focused on heart purification (*qalbun*). The elderly residents actively participate in in-depth studies on concepts such as *qalbun salim* (a sound heart), *qalbun maridh* (a diseased heart), and *qalbun mayyit* (a dead heart). Their reflections on these teachings open contemplative spaces to explore the meaning of life, tranquility, and true happiness. Thus, the elderly in this environment do not treat old age as a passive phase but rather as the peak of existential exploration and inner transformation.

A recent study by Musmiller (2020) found that elderly involvement in structured spiritual activities significantly enhances psychological well-being and a sense of life's meaning. Harwati & Murtiningsih (2023) also showed that spiritual experience plays a crucial role in helping the elderly find balance in facing aging—physically, psychologically, and environmentally. Religious practices and gratitude to God are also associated with increased peace and happiness among the elderly. Other studies reveal that higher levels of spirituality in older adults correlate positively with life satisfaction and reduced feelings of loneliness. Elderly individuals who actively engage in religious and spiritual practices tend to experience greater inner peace and readiness for the afterlife (Fajar et al., 2022; Matillah et al., 2018).

This phenomenon affirms the idea that old age can be a phase of attaining inner happiness through a heart-centered spiritual approach rather than solely relying on physical and social management. It highlights the importance of spirituality as a foundational dimension for achieving optimal quality of life in old age. Studies by Saputri et al. (2025) and Heidari et al. (2019) support these findings, revealing that elderly individuals who are actively involved in religious communities and receive spiritual support show lower levels of stress and higher life satisfaction compared to those with minimal spiritual involvement. Therefore, the experience of the elderly at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, Segamat, Malaysia, can serve as an ideal model for holistic elder care, placing spirituality as the core pillar of happiness and inner peace in later life.

Previous research has primarily focused on the role of family support, physical activity, and psychotherapeutic approaches in maintaining elderly mental health. These studies typically emphasize external and physical aspects affecting the psychological condition of older adults, such as the role of family in fulfilling their emotional and spiritual needs (Alfiani, 2023). Physical activity is often seen as an effective way to reduce stress and improve life quality (Febriyanti, 2021). Conventional psychotherapy is also commonly used to address depression and anxiety in older adults with fairly effective outcomes (Syam'ani, 2023). However, while these aspects are important, they tend to overlook the deeper spiritual dimension—especially experiences centered on inner purification and heart-based well-being.

In contrast, the spiritual reflections of the elderly through a *qalbu-centered* approach have rarely been explored phenomenologically and narratively despite their great potential to address existential problems in old age. This approach emphasizes the *qalb* (heart) as the center of spiritual experience that provides life meaning, tranquility, and genuine happiness in later years (Purnama et al., 2021). Phenomenological studies also reveal that spiritual dimensions are valuable in helping the elderly develop adaptive coping strategies for aging and fostering a positive self-concept (Syam'ani, 2023). Thus, research that integrates a *qalbu-centered* approach is essential to fill existing gaps and provide a more holistic understanding of elderly well-being, particularly within the Islamic cultural and spiritual context.

The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of happiness from the perspective of elderly individuals who deeply engage in *qalbun* studies within a religious setting like Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud. This approach integrates classical Islamic traditions on understanding the heart (*qalb*) with the existential reflections of contemporary elders, paving the way for a view of happiness that is not only psychological and social but also deeply spiritual. This study emphasizes the importance of an *qalbun-centered* experience as the core of spiritual transformation that provides true meaning and inner peace in old age—an aspect often overlooked in mental health literature for the elderly (Suwandi et al., 2024; Anggraini & Asmita, 2022; Rahmah, 2015). This *qalbu-centered* approach aligns with the core principles of Islamic psychotherapy, which places the *qalb* (heart) as the center of human spiritual, moral, and psychological consciousness. Within the framework of Islamic psychotherapy, as explained by classical scholars such as al-Ghazali (Sarmani & Ninggal, 2008) and Ibn Qayyim (Al-Jauziyyah, 2021), as well as contemporary figures like Badri (1979), the heart is regarded as a spiritual organ that determines a person's direction in life and serves as the core of moral evaluation between good and evil (Zaharuddin, 2017; Zanariah et al., 2022).

Therefore, this research is expected to enrich Islamic spiritual counseling discourse with a more applicable and contextual approach, especially in addressing the complex psychological challenges of older adults. Furthermore, this study has the potential to significantly contribute to the development of a heart-based Islamic spiritual counseling model that can be applied systematically yet flexibly, tailored to the needs of the elderly in religious contexts.

Counseling approaches emphasizing heart purification (*al-tazkiyatun al-nafs*) and spiritual practices such as *dhikr*, prayer, and inner reflection have proven effective in reducing anxiety and enhancing the quality of life among the elderly (Suwandi et al., 2024; Ghofur & Nurjannah, 2024; Rahmah, 2015). This model not only considers physical and psychological aspects but also places the spiritual dimension as the primary foundation for achieving inner happiness and holistic well-being. Consequently, this research paves the way for more comprehensive interventions rooted in Islamic tradition while remaining relevant to the needs of today's elderly. It contributes not only to the academic discourse on aging and spirituality but also offers practical insights for developing transformative and humane programs in Islamic institutions such as madrasahs and elderly boarding schools.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to explore and understand the profound meaning experienced by the elderly about their spiritual reflections on *qalbu* studies in the pursuit of happiness. The phenomenological method allows the researcher to capture the essence of subjective experiences that are both spiritual and emotional (Mungin, 2012).

Research Location and Time

This research was conducted at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud (MIM), Segamat, Malaysia, located in Segamat, Johor, Malaysia. The madrasah is a private institution dedicated to the education and development of elderly individuals. The study took place over the course of one month, from January 27 to February 26, 2025.

Participants

The selection of informants in this study was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, totaling five individuals (three males and two females) from among 90 elderly students currently studying at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, Segamat, Malaysia. The selection was based on specific criteria, including having studied at the madrasah for more than one year and being actively involved in the *qalbu* (heart) study sessions. Additionally, the selection was supported by observational considerations, in which these individuals were identified as the most focused and highly motivated to deepen their understanding of *qalbu* studies.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in this study was conducted using three techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were carried out to explore the participants' reflections and experiences related to the happiness they discovered through the understanding and internalization of *qalbun* studies (Sugiyono, 2018). The questions were designed to uncover their religious, emotional, and existential experiences. Participant observation involved the researcher directly engaging in the *qalbu* study activities at the madrasah and observing the interactions and expressions of the elderly during the sessions. This method was used to capture the social and spiritual context surrounding the participants. Meanwhile, documentation was used to complement the data gathered from interviews and observations. "The data analysis technique used employs the approach of Miles et al. (2014), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions and data verification."

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Overview of the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Ma'ud

The Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud is a non-formal Islamic educational institution specially designed for senior citizens. It operates under the Pertubuhan Kebajikan dan Dakwah Ibnu Mas'ud, a non-governmental organization (NGO) established on June 14, 2010, in Segamat, Johor, Malaysia, under the Societies Act 1966, with a primary focus on the development of Islamic Education, particularly for adults and older people. The organization was founded by Haji Arasy Bin Haji Masod along with his extended family and was supported by prominent Islamic figures such as Datuk Dr. Zulkifli Mohammad Al-Bakri and Ustaz Ahmad Fadzli Al-Yamani. Unlike nursing homes, this madrasah focuses on religious Education and spiritual development based on Islamic teachings (Masut & Mutalib, 2019).

To be eligible to reside in this madrasah, applicants must be 55 years or older for long-term stay and 50 years or older for the "Pondokcation" program. They must be physically healthy, come voluntarily with family support, be single women or elderly couples, and pass an interview and probationary period. At the madrasah, elderly residents fill their days with meaningful activities such as attending daily religious classes (studying the Qur'an, fiqh, tawhid, and tasawwuf), engaging in dhikr, self-reflection (*muhasabah*), and performing communal worship such as congregational prayers and *qiyamullail*. The primary aim of this madrasah is to provide inner peace, strengthen spiritual well-being in old age, and foster a community of elderly individuals living in a supportive and religious environment. By learning at Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, the elderly experience a quality life,

find like-minded peers, and benefit from a safe and caring environment ([Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, 2025](#)).



Photo 1. Building of Madrasah Ibnu Masud, Segamat, Johor, Malaysia

The study on the *qalbu* (heart) was conducted over one month from January 27 to February 26, 2025, effectively running from February 1 to February 26, 2025. The *qalbu* study sessions were scheduled once a week, on Tuesdays from 10:00 to 11:00 AM WIB (11:00 AM to 12:00 PM Malaysia Time), with the weekly madrasah activity schedule as follows.



Photo 2. *Qalbu* (Heart) Study Activity at Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud

This study found that elderly individuals who participated in the *qalbu* study sessions at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, Segamat, Malaysia, experienced significant inner transformation. This change was reflected in their stories and personal experiences, which conveyed a sense of calm, a renewed understanding of life's meaning, and a readiness to face death. Using the analytical techniques of [Miles et al. \(2014\)](#), the data collected were categorized into five main themes. These themes include inner peace after attending the *qalbu* sessions, the discovery of life's

meaning and spiritual purpose, an increased sense of gratitude and sincerity, the emergence of true happiness from feeling close to Allah SWT, and an awareness of death along with the readiness to face it.

Older people felt a sense of calm and peace after attending the *qalbu* study sessions at the madrasah. One informant, Mr. Abdul Rozak bin Ahmad Marzuki (62 years old), shared that although he had often heard the term *qalbu* from religious teachers before, the *qalbu* study program held at the madrasah offered a different and deeper understanding. He began to realize that the *qalbu*, or heart, is an essential part of the human self. After each session, he felt that his heart became peaceful and calm, even though his body ached due to age. He felt lighter in carrying out his daily life. This experience indicates that the *qalbu* study supports a process of heart purification toward *qalbu Salim*—a heart that is pure and obedient to Allah. When the heart begins to understand its role as the center of a person's relationship with God, the inner self naturally experiences true peace.

The *qalbu* study not only deepens religious knowledge but also offers enlightenment about the meaning of life for older people. This is reflected in the experience of Mak Cik Ruqiyah binti Md Saleh (78 years old), who has been studying at the madrasah for seven years. She shared that her life used to be filled with anxiety, but through the *qalbu* lessons delivered by the ustadz, she began to understand the true purpose of human life. She realized that the heart is the main path to finding Allah. If a person wishes to seek Him, the first step is to purify the heart from all negative traits. According to her, after attending the study sessions, her life feels brighter and more directed. This meaning illustrates that spiritual study awakens a new awareness of life's true purpose—not merely as a routine but as a journey toward the pleasure of Allah SWT. This journey can only be realized when the human heart is free from negative qualities that cloud inner peace and hinder closeness to Allah SWT.

The elderly residents of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud have begun to accept the reality of aging with more open and peaceful hearts. What was once seen as a burden is now embraced as a valuable period to draw closer to Allah SWT. This is reflected in the experience of Pak Cik Haji Saleh bin Jamain (70 years old), who expressed deep gratitude for being able to live at the madrasah. He shared that the religious and serene atmosphere of the madrasah, along with its various spiritual activities—particularly the study of the heart (*qalbu*)—has helped him to understand and internalize the value of sincerity when facing life's challenges. Through these studies, he has undergone a deep process of self-reflection and heart transformation towards *qalbu Salim*—a heart that is pure and obedient to Allah. His words, "very, very grateful" and "closer to Allah," reveal his experience of inner peace and true spiritual happiness. For elderly individuals like him, the madrasah has become a place that brings renewed meaning to life—a sacred space for inner reconciliation, spiritual closeness to God, and preparation for the final stage of life with contentment and tranquility.

Several elderly residents at the Elderly Boarding School of Madrasah Ibnu Mas'ud, Segamat, Malaysia, have begun to experience a profound shift in their understanding of happiness, especially after gaining insight into the concept of *qalbun* (the heart). One of them is Pak Cik Abdul Samad bin Baba, a 65-year-old retired police officer. He shared that he once believed happiness lay in having many children, a high-ranking position, and abundant wealth. However, after going through a process of learning and self-reflection at the madrasah, he realized that true happiness does not come from worldly achievements but from the peace and calmness of the heart that arises through closeness to Allah SWT. He came to understand that while children, status, and wealth are important, they feel meaningless when the heart is not at peace. His statement reflects a significant change in perspective—from a materialistic outlook to a spiritual orientation. This reflection illustrates that understanding the heart (*qalbu*) has led to a profound inner transformation: from pursuing external success to nurturing the inner self. Happiness is no longer defined by abundance but by the serenity of the heart and a strong relationship with the Creator.

The study of *qalbu* (the heart) at the Ibnu Mas'ud Elderly Madrasah has fostered a profound existential awareness among the elderly, particularly regarding death and the afterlife. This is reflected in the statement of Mak Cik Jumiah binti Ijan, a 78-year-old resident, who shared that the *qalbu* lessons have made her more mindful of death—but not with fear, instead with readiness. She acknowledges that death is inevitable for every human being, and she sincerely hopes to face it with a pure heart and a peaceful soul. For her, death is not the end but the beginning of a meeting with Allah SWT.

This reflection illustrates a high level of spirituality, where death is no longer viewed as something frightening but rather as a natural process to be embraced with sincerity. Her desire to die in a state of purity reflects an understanding of the importance of *qalbu* Salim—a heart that is free from spiritual diseases such as envy, hatred, greed, and resentment. It signifies a mature faith and profound spiritual awareness cultivated through reflection and learning.

The statement "death is not the end, but the beginning of meeting Allah" reveals a strong belief in the afterlife and a sincere longing to reunite with the Creator. This awareness is not merely a form of resignation but a sign of inner and spiritual preparedness—something that can only be achieved through heart purification and a deep, intimate connection with Allah SWT.

Discussion

These findings indicate that the study of *qalbu* functions as a reflective and transformational process for older people. Through the internalization of the values of the heart in Islam, older people discover new meaning in their lives, experience changes in emotions and attitudes, and attain spiritual happiness that is not dependent on worldly matters. This aligns with the view of Al-Ghazali (1058), who stated that understanding and nurturing the *qalbu* (heart) is the core of achieving peace of mind and inner stability. When the heart is in good condition, it positively influences all aspects of a person, including the intellect and the impulses of the *nafs* (self-desires). Conversely, damage to the *qalbu* can trigger emotional and moral disturbances (Duriana & Lihi, 2015). According to him, the *qalbu* (heart) is the king of the human body that governs the entire body (Al-Ghazali, 2002). If the heart is good, the whole body will be good—cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, and spiritually. However, if the heart is corrupted, the entire body will be corrupted as well. This is consistent with the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

أَلَا وَإِنَّ فِي الْجَسَدِ مُضْغَةً إِذَا صَلَحَتْ صَلَحَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ ، وَإِذَا فَسَدَتْ فَسَدَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ .
أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ

"...Indeed, in the body there is a piece of flesh. If it is sound, the whole body is sound. And if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted. Verily, it is the heart..." (Narrated by Bukhari no. 52 and Muslim no. 1599).

Thus, these findings demonstrate that understanding the *qalbu* (heart) more comprehensively is a crucial step toward achieving both worldly and spiritual perfection (Sa'diyah, 2024). Understanding the *qalbu* also helps one discover his life purpose. This reflects the statement attributed to the heart scholars quoted by al-Ghazali (1058): "He who knows himself will know his Lord" (Ghazali, 1998). Grasping the *qalbu* plays a vital role in finding one's life direction, meaning, and spirituality, as the heart serves as the center of all dimensions of life—including thoughts, feelings, and behavior. When a person can recognize and care for his heart, he will live a more focused and meaningful life (Lubis et al., 2023).

Having deep knowledge of the *qalbu* and applying it can also cultivate gratitude and sincerity because the heart ultimately belongs to Allah SWT. Al-Ghazali (1058) similarly explains that by deeply knowing the *qalbu*, one becomes more capable of managing emotions, appreciating blessings, and doing good sincerely. Gratitude and sincerity reflect a healthy heart that remains connected to Allah

SWT. He further clarifies that gratitude consists of three essential components: recognizing the Giver of blessings, feeling joy accompanied by obedience and humility, and performing outward actions involving the heart, speech, and deeds. With profound care of the *qalbu*, a person embraces all three, making gratitude not just words but a sincere, heartfelt expression (Ningsih et al., 2024).

Recognizing the *qalbu* can also generate true happiness. Al-Ghazali (1058) wrote an entire treatise on happiness, asserting that those who care for their *qalbu* can achieve happiness by following a process: knowing oneself, knowing Allah, and knowing one's community. This is the embodiment of spiritual well-being — Fisher's (1998) model suggests that spiritual well-being arises when there is harmony with oneself, others, nature, and God (Tumanggor, 2019).

Since knowing the *qalbu* brings serenity and joy within, it prepares individuals to face death, for the *qalbu* is the source of inner calm. The heart is the vessel through which one perceives both worldly life and the Hereafter. Understanding the *qalbu* means learning how to receive, process, and respond to information and experiences, including death. By recognizing death as part of human life's cycle, a person can face it peacefully and willingly. This aligns with the hadith in Sunan Ibn Majah, where the Prophet ﷺ said:

“...I was with the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), and a man from among the Ansar came to him and greeted the Prophet (ﷺ) with Salam. Then he said: 'O Messenger of Allah, which of the believers is best?' He said: 'He who has the best manners among them.' He said: 'Which of them is wisest?' He said: 'The one who remembers death the most and is best in preparing for it. Those are the wisest...'” (Narrated by Ibnu Majah 4259). (Majah, n.d.).

In summary, this study reinforces the view that the *album* is not merely a spiritual organ but also the center of human consciousness and happiness (Al-Ghazali, 1988). This reflection is also an act of purifying the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), bringing one closer to God. Theoretically, it supports Al-Ghazali's Theory of the heart as the foundational basis for spiritual well-being. A clean heart (*qalbun salim*) is essential for finding meaning and inner tranquility. Empirically, this study enriches the literature on Islamic psychology, spiritual gerontology, and elderly well-being. Practically, it offers benefits to elderly madrasahs and pesantren: *Qalbu*-based studies can become a core curriculum to strengthen spiritual wellness for elders. It also provides an approach for families and caregivers in elder Education and upbringing and offers Muslim counselors and psychologists a model for counseling intervention.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the study of *qalbun* at Madrasah Ibnu Masud, Segamat, Johor, Malaysia, has enabled the elderly to engage in deep reflection on life, death, and their relationship with Allah. This reflective process has led to a transformation of the heart, marked by increased gratitude, sincerity, patience, and preparedness for the end of life. The ultimate result of this reflection is spiritual happiness—a sense of inner peace and true life meaning that is not dependent on external circumstances. It is recommended that the administrators of elderly care institutions maintain and continuously develop the *qalbun* curriculum in a consistent and contextually relevant manner to the lives of older people. For future researchers, this study could be expanded beyond older people to include younger adults and adolescents. For the government and faith-based social NGOs, greater support and attention are encouraged for the establishment of elderly madrasahs with a spiritual foundation, adopting the *album* approach as one of the key strategies to help achieve the well-being and happiness of older people.

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