

# Transformation in buddhism



The fundamental root of all suffering is ignorance regarding the nature of reality; that is the foundation of all Buddhism (Moore 2016). Suffering, then, may be overcome only by eradicating said ignorance. To achieve liberation from suffering means to aspire for self-transformation, an essential goal of the Buddha's teachings (Moore 2016). Transformation in Buddhism revolves around the realization of death. However, the definition of death and how it is understood raises a plethora of concerns. There is no notion of transformation without its relation to the recognition of death.

The question is then, what is the realization of death? Dōgen, a Japanese Buddhist and the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen in the thirteenth century, once said: "It is a mistake to understand that one passes from life to death" (Xing 2010). In everyday life, individuals are under the impression that they are not alive, but that they may die sometime in the future. Dōgen, on the other hand, urged that the elementary understanding of life and death was a mistake (Xing 2010). The conventional way of thinking supports the notion that life and death are dissimilar to one another and that their correlation is perceived as a process that begins with life and concludes with death. Here arises another pressing question that must be answered. When we consider the relationship between life and death in this particular way, from which perspective are we posing the question – in life or in death? Or from a position entirely separate? Analyzing the link between life and death as a process developing from the former to the latter, our position is outside of both (McMahan 2016). By taking the stance outside of both realms, we determine our life as something "present" and our death as something which will inevitably occur in the "future" (McMahan 2016).

The controversy of whether self-transformation is possible requires a more in-depth comprehension of Buddhist philosophy. The answer, however, may suggest a simple but generally unilluminating answer. According to the doctrines of the Buddha, attachment to self is taught as the pertinent cause of human suffering (Abe 1987, 9-10). It establishes many of the psychological states that takes away from our happiness and that we may wish to change. Still, the Buddha also stressed that attachment to self is also deeply entrenched in ignorance because there is, in fact, no self (Bodhi 1998). Taken verbatim, this notion seems to suggest that self-transformation is not attainable due to the fact that there is no self to transform. If something does not exist, you cannot change it (Bodhi 1998).

On the contrary, when the Buddha spoke of there not being a self, he was attempting to direct followers away from the belief that we have a permanent, unchanging essence. The objective is that if we were to compartmentalize all of our combining parts (i. e. our physical bodies, beliefs, desires, etc.), we will discover that each part is ephemeral; none remains stagnant across a lifespan (Bodhi 1998). This is a desirable outcome for self-transformation as it means that our psychological characteristics are not permanently fixed; self-transformation is possible. Furthermore, it is affiliated with more principal teachings of the Buddha, particularly the Four Noble Truths (Tsering 2005). First, suffering. Second, the cause of suffering. Third, the acceptance that suffering can end. The Four Noble Truths ascertain that change from a condition of inescapable suffering to one of happiness or satisfaction is possible. This brings about a set of guidelines for the possibility of self-transformation (Tsering 2005). In order to reconstruct

one's cognitive character in one way or another, one needs to adjust the causes and conditions of that specific aspect of character. In order to do so, we first need to understand what these causes and conditions may be and how they are related to the appropriate states of character. A simple medical analogy is utilized by Buddhists in order to illustrate this case; medicine is deemed adequate if and only if it successfully attacks the illness. It is futile to take acetaminophen to cure cancer. Contrary to this, recognizing the causes and conditions of a certain psychological state may not be as simple a task as one may believe it to be. Take social anxiety into consideration. Social anxiety is characterized as a fear of social situations (American Psychiatric Association 2013) and fear is an anticipatory state dealing with situations that may occur in the future but that the subject wants to avoid. Their reasoning behind them not wanting the said situations to take place is associated with their interests and/or values; the situations may threaten either themselves or someone they care about. The subjects also believe that they have may not have control over whether their fear will come to fruition. For a certain approach to be an effective cure for fear, it must address the specific features of the fear, and to be an effective cure for the kind of concern that is social anxiety, an awareness of the characteristics that sets it apart from other varying apprehensions is required. We also need to interpret the distinct ways this psychological state is exhibited in a particular subject; what brings about its episodes and other factors that may be involved that contribute to its persistence for this subject. These aspects may not be obvious to any particular person and may vary between different people. More often than not, we are unaware of the fear we experience, for instance, until it is fully developed and strongly present in our minds.

According to the Buddha, perceptions of “ I, me, mine” build many of our psychological states without our being fully knowledgeable of it (Bodhi 1998). Someone who encounters social anxiety might be attentive to the set of social cues they fear but not to some of the attributes of the anxiety, such as a low sense of self-worth, false beliefs about the judgement of others, a narrow view of the possible outcomes of certain situations in a social setting, a tendency to focus on the negative, and unreasonable standards for success, as if performing well in these circumstances will somehow prove their worth in comparison to others (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Even if the person becomes mindful of the causes and conditions underlying some state, attempting to change these causes and conditions will most likely prove to be futile, and the act of manipulating them may, in turn, cause the person to become dysfunctional themselves or evolve into more dysfunctional states of being. For example, low self-worth is a feature that can be deep-seated and reinforced over a lifetime. Therefore, practices and processes aimed at self care and strengthening self-esteem may bear ambiguous results since the results are contingent on the comparisons with others, which may induce a more questionable psychological state, such as narcissism or perfectionism (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

Given the intricacy of the matter, one might speculate how self-transformation could ever be attained. Buddhists support a wide range of reflective thinking, however, not all of them involve detailed philosophical reflection. Referring back to the medicinal analogy; a pharmacist must obtain a deep level of comprehension regarding a disease in order to formulate a medicine that will adequately treat it. However, this level of

understanding may not be necessary in order for a person to take a pill and receive the benefits. If a person who struggles with social anxiety were to come to the realization that it was what was manifesting the low sense of self-worth, this awareness may re-direct their behaviour to those more geared towards changing this belief. Since concepts of self-worth predicate the majority of our psychological states, a shift in this belief will likely affect their overall state of well-being.

Buddhism also presents other methods. The most notable is mindfulness practice. In its most popular form, it comprises of non-judgemental attention to the various thoughts, feelings, and sensations that emerge and desist in one's conscious awareness (Moore 2016). This practice is often prescribed as a way of relieving stress, but it is also effective in transforming a certain psychological state (Moore 2016). As mentioned above, we are unaware of the fear we experience until it is fully developed and strongly present in our minds, and at this point it is too late for preventative measures. Yet, many of the states we hope to change, including but not limited to fear, anxiety, stress, and depression, have affective and psychological conditions that develop in a very inconspicuous way when the states first blossom before escalating into the focus of awareness (Xing 2010). The primary bodily indication of fear, for example, can incorporate an almost indistinguishable trembling, increased heart rate, sweating, or tensing of one's shoulders. There are also subtle discrepancies in how fear is displayed in different individuals, and its development is influenced by other states that are sparked at the same time. The practice of mindfulness allows one to be aware of the inexplicit indicators of fear as they are produced and being able

to detect them early on creates an opportunity for other methods of therapeutic intervention (Bodhi 1998) In regard to social anxiety, it might initiate a chance to engage in some cognitive practice prior to entering the social setting (i. e. positive reinforcement, targeting the low feeling of self-worth that often lingers this specific state). One may also take into consideration changing the bodily aspects of the state; actively working and relaxing one's shoulders or controlling one's breathing would be an example of changing a bodily aspect that may help thwart the anxiety from fully surfacing. This is a very practical perspective of the Buddhist practice and in it, the process of self-transformation is simple and ordinary, so long as what one does is properly addressed.

What differentiates the Buddha's course of self-transformation from the plethora of other doctrines supporting a similar outcome is the addition of another principle with which it is perpetually intertwined. This is the principle of self-transcendence, the effort to eradicate all pursuits to forming a sense of personal identity (Bodhi 1998). The Buddhist training also emphasizes a parallel effort to overcome all identification with the aspects that compose our phenomenal being. The guidance of *anatta* or "not-self" is not so much a philosophical thesis demanding intellectual assent as it is a recipe for self-transcendence (Bodhi 1998). It asserts that our natural tendencies to strive for a sense of identity by believing our personalities to be "I" and "mine" is in reality an impulse built from clinging, a tendency that simultaneously lies at the foundation of our suffering. If, therefore, we aim to escape the anguish of suffering, the final goal of self-transformation must not end with the change of the personality into some sublime and elevated form. What is

necessary, rather, is a transformation that brings about the removal of clinging, and with it, the removal of all tendencies to self-affirmation (Bodhi 1998).

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