

Can We Reinvent Ourselves?

Bronwyn Finnigan
School of Philosophy, RSSH, Australian National University

Correspondence: Coombs Building, Canberra, 2601, ACT, Australia
Email: bronwyn.finnigan@anu.edu.au

Is self-transformation possible and, if so, how can it be achieved? An initial reading of Buddhist philosophy might suggest a simple but perhaps unilluminating answer. The Buddha taught that attachment to self is a central cause of human suffering. It underpins many of the psychological states that detract from our happiness and that we might wish to change. However, the Buddha also taught that attachment to self is rooted in ignorance because there is, in fact, no self. Taken at face value, this might seem to suggest that self-transformation is not possible because there is no self to transform. You can't change what's not there.

While there is a seed of truth to this, it is too simple. When the Buddha taught that there is no self, he meant to deny that we have a permanent, unchanging essence. The idea is that if we analyse ourselves into all of our constituent parts (our physical bodies, beliefs, desires, memories, dispositions and all other psychological tendencies) we will find that each is impermanent; none remains the same across a lifetime. And we will not find a single substance underlying these components that unifies them all as aspects of 'me'.

This is a welcome outcome for self-transformation because it means that our psychological characters are not permanently fixed; self-transformation is possible. And it connects to more fundamental teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha taught Four Noble Truths. The first is the truth or fact of suffering. The second analyses its causes. The third 'truth' affirms that suffering can cease. It is possible to change from a state of pervasive suffering to one of happiness or well-being. Why does the Buddha think this is true? Because he thinks that nothing exists permanently, everything depends for its existence on causes and conditions. It follows that if one changes the causes and conditions of some effect, one changes the effect. This provides a guideline for the possibility of self-transformation. Psychological change is possible if one changes the relevant causes and conditions. In order to transform one's psychological character in some respect, one needs to alter the causes and conditions of that aspect of character.

This is easier said than done. We first need to know what these causes and conditions are and how they relate to the relevant states of character. Buddhists often employ a medical analogy to make this point; medicine is only effective to the extent that it successfully targets the illness. There is no point taking paracetamol to cure cancer. But understanding the causes and conditions of some psychological state is not a simple task. Let's take social anxiety as our example. Social anxiety is a kind of fear and fear is an anticipatory state concerned with things that could happen in the future but that the subject does not want to happen. The reason they don't want them to happen relates to their interests or values; they might pose a threat to themselves or someone or something they care about. The subject also feels that they have limited control over whether what they fear will happen. For some strategy to be an effective remedy for fear, it must target some of these features of fear. And to be an effective

remedy for the kind of fear that is social anxiety, an understanding is needed of the features that sets it apart from other kinds of fear.

We also need to understand the various ways this psychological state manifests for a particular person; what triggers its occurrence for them and what other psychological states they have that condition its persistence. This can be different between people. And it might not be obvious to any particular person. We are often not aware that we are experiencing fear, for instance, until it is full-blown and vividly present in our minds. But by then it is too late to change. We are also often not aware of the beliefs that underpin many of our psychological states. According to the Buddha, conceptions of ‘I, me, mine’ underpin many of our psychological states without our necessarily being aware of it. Someone who experiences social anxiety might be aware of the kinds of social harms they fear might occur without also knowing that their anxiety might assume (e.g.) a low sense of self-worth, false beliefs about the judgments of others, overly simple views about social dynamics, as if they are all the same, a narrow view of what is possible in social settings, a tendency to focus only on the negative, and perhaps also unreasonable standards for social success, as if performing well in this setting will somehow prove one’s worth in comparison to others. And even if the person becomes aware of the causes and conditions that underpin some state, these causes and conditions might be difficult to budge and certain strategies for budging them might, themselves, be dysfunctional or lead to more dysfunctional states. A belief in low self-worth can be deeply engrained and reinforced over a lifetime. And some ways of changing this belief, such as some practices aimed at building self-esteem, might have unstable results because they depend on comparisons with others, and might also lead to more problematic psychological states, such as narcissism or perfectionism.

Given this complexity, one might wonder how self-transformation could ever be possible. Buddhists propose a range of contemplative practices, however, not all of which involve detailed philosophical reflection. To return to the medicinal metaphor; a pharmacist needs to understand a disease in great detail in order to create a medicine that will effectively treat it. But such understanding may not be needed in order to put a pill in one’s mouth and receive its benefits. I say ‘may not’ because philosophical reflection is one beneficial form of Buddhist contemplative practice. If a person who experiences social anxiety were to realise that it assumed a low sense of self-worth, this realisation might lead them to engage in practices aimed at changing this belief. And since conceptions of self-worth underpin a large number of our psychological states, a change in this belief will likely impact their overall state of well-being.

Buddhism also offers other strategies. The most well-known is mindfulness practice. In its most popular form it consists in paying non-judgmental attention to the various thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise and cease in one’s conscious awareness. This practice is often recommended as a strategy for stress-relief. But it can also help transform a specific psychological state. As I said earlier, we often only notice that we are experiencing some psychological state when it is full-blown in our conscious awareness. And by then it is too late to prevent it from arising. However, many of the states we often want to change, such as fear, anxiety, stress, and depression, have affective and physiological aspects that manifest in a very subtle form when the state first emerges before intensifying to become the focus of awareness. The initial bodily manifestation of fear, for instance, can include an almost indiscernible bodily trembling, increased heart rate, sweating or the tensing of one’s shoulders. There are also subtle differences in how fear manifests for different people, and its manifestation is affected by other states that are triggered at the same time. Mindfulness

Published in IAI News, July 16th, 2018 (https://iainews.iai.tv/articles/reinventing-ourselves-according-to-the-buddha-auid-1108?_ga=2.241941058.1539960696.1531748710-252065722.1531156171)

practice can train one to notice these very early indicators of fear as they arise in one's own case. And catching them early creates an opportunity for other kinds of therapeutic intervention. In the case of social anxiety, it might create an opportunity to engage in some cognitive practice before entering the social setting, such as positive self-talk, which targets the low sense of self-worth that often underpins this state. One might also focus on changing the bodily aspects of the state, such as by actively relaxing one's shoulders or regulating one's breathing, which may prevent the anxiety from fully emerging on this occasion. In this very practical respect, the Buddhist process of self-transformation can be simple, ordinary and mundane so long as what one does is properly targeted. And this is welcome since we often attempt self-transformation in the context of our ordinary, everyday life.