

FRONTIERS

THE SCIENCE OF TRANSFORMATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Have you ever changed your mind in a big way? In a way that fundamentally shifted how you see yourself, your friends and family, your livelihood, even your core relationship to the world in which you live? Maybe it was a change you sought—the product of a lengthy process—or a change that was thrust upon you in a time of transition: a sudden illness, a failed relationship, the death of a loved one, or an unplanned change in career. In each case you may have examined your deepest assumptions about how to live or what has meaning for you. If any of this sounds familiar, you're not alone.

In 1998, the US General Social Survey found that 39 percent of those polled have had a spiritual or religious experience that changed their lives. In their book *Quantum Change*, William Miller and Janet C'deBaca describe sudden, dramatic, and permanent shifts in behavior, motivations, values, and ways of being—lightning-strike instants of transformation. Such moments often carry the signature of “grace,” for often they leave us with an awareness of ourselves in relationship to things beyond. Some, like IONS’ founder Edgar Mitchell, report that their sense of “I” becomes part of a larger “we,” often with recognition that interconnectedness is the true basis of reality. For others, this realization awakens a powerful inner imperative to find ways to foster and expand their kinship or oneness with a greater whole.

MAPPING THE INNER PROCESS

What is the meaning of “transformation”? How do we begin to cultivate transformative, life-changing experiences that enhance our daily lives and the lives of those around us? What is the relationship between sudden, profoundly transformative experiences and a more gradual, develop-

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mental process of lifelong transformation? What kinds of practices support and nurture the process of transformation? These questions have led to a research program at the Institute of Noetic Sciences called the Transformation Project.

Our research team began by collecting stories of IONS members’ personal transformative experiences. Analyzing a range of experiences allowed us to distinguish between “exceptional” experiences (typically short in duration and not crucial in life impact) and “transformative” experiences that are genuinely life-changing. We then conducted in-depth interviews with more than 40 teachers and scholars from a variety of religions and transformative wisdom traditions. The participants included Ram Dass; Rachel Naomi Remen, MD; Swami Veda Bharati; Stanislav Grof, MD; Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa; Sylvia Boorstein; and the Venerable Pa-auk Sayadaw, among others. Each was asked to respond to 20 questions about the transformative process, drawn from their own experience, their observations of students, and the teachings in their traditions. The goals were to deepen our understanding of what initiates or triggers transformative experiences, how these transformative experiences are translated into lasting shifts in worldview, what milestones characterize the path of transformation, what kinds of practices or ways of being cultivate lasting transformation, and what outcomes these experiences and practices lead to. Several themes emerged that appear to be common across both individual experiences of transformation and across widely varying traditions:

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DREW GALLOWAY. PHOTO: JEANNE CLAYTON



A Deep Change in Perspective—Many of our teacher/scholars noted that while transformation *results* in changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the actual process of transformation does not involve changing these things directly but instead requires a change in perspective—altering one’s core assumptions about the nature of things. Rather than changing one’s experience or situation, the way one relates to that experience or situation changes. This subtle, yet fundamental, turning of attention and redirecting of intention shifts the entire landscape and one’s trajectory through it. Our interviewees emphasized that although spiritual practitioners often continue to experience such negative emotions as jealousy, pride, or greed, through spiritual experience and practice they are less “hooked” by those experiences, less driven by that conditioning, and more able to make conscious choices about their behavior.

A Changing Sense of Self—Our respondents reported that in addition to an expanded worldview, there is also an alteration in one’s sense of self and place in relation to others and the world, often described as a radical widening and deepening of one’s personal identity. They often reported an awakening to a “witnessing self,” fundamentally distinct from particular thoughts, impulses, feelings, or sensations, accompanied by a feeling of being more real, more genuine, more authentically themselves. Many of these spiritual experiences involved a diminished sense of personal identity and an enhanced sense of connection to others, an experience that became an enduring part of the transformational process.

The Ripple Effect—It appears that the shift that takes place in spiritual transformation is at so fundamental a level that it simultaneously impacts many areas of one’s life. An analogy that may help to explain this is the concept of a “common pathway” in biochemical mechanisms of illness and healing. In complex illnesses such as heart disease, for example, a multitude of causal factors in varying combinations can result in a unique constellation of symptoms. Attempting to address each causal factor—to remedy each symptom one by one—is not as efficient as finding a single means to influence some, if not all, of them and their impacts. Thus the shift that appears to occur in transformation, the change in the way that one views the world and one’s place in it, may serve as a common pathway by which many aspects of life are improved at once.

Exceptional is Not Transformational—Although a spiritual experience can lead to transformation, the former can be transitory whereas the latter is more fundamental and permanent. Our respondents warned against mistaking spiritual experience for transformation, noting that people can become “addicted” to repeated spiritual experiences because of their intensity and often-pleasurable nature while ignoring the more mundane work of integrating deep realizations into day-to-day life. True transformation requires actual manifested changes in behavior in addition to changes in perspective on self and world.

Life is the Ultimate

Practice—For many people, transformation is part of a formal spiritual practice such as yoga, meditation, shamanic work, and so on. These practices both cultivate spiritual experience and support its integration into everyday life. As one continues to travel the path of transformation, however, the objective becomes less about seeking spiritual experience and more about living specific virtues such as truth, goodness,

beauty, love, kindness, compassion, generosity, and service. Transformational experience over time becomes less of the fireworks variety and more of the traffic jam and diaper change variety, each activity imbued with a sacred or mindful tone. Spiritual practice over time becomes not necessarily “spiritual” at all but simply “right living,” a natural part of healthy human development. As one of our interviewees, George Leonard, noted: “Almost anything you do on a long-term basis, even something as commonplace as gardening, can become a practice. It is a practice to develop a communion with everything in your garden, so that your roses, for example, are treated not as mere objects but as honored guests at the banquet of life. But if you garden primarily to impress the neighbors or win prizes with your roses, then you are not engaged in a practice. Paradoxically, the person who gardens as a practice, for the sheer love of it, is probably the one who will impress the neighbors and win prizes.”

THE SCIENCE OF TRANSFORMATION

As the results of our study continue to emerge, they are being translated into a cross-traditional model of transformation that can guide future studies. We have already translated the hypotheses generated by the wisdom of these elders and teachers into a new survey instrument and administered it to

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about your own experiences with spiritual transformation! Help us discover what initiates transformative experiences, what happens during them, and what is changed as a result.

Go to www.transformationsurvey.com.

500 individuals engaged in transformative practice. We are now expanding the survey in collaboration with researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, to better understand the emotional, cognitive, and physiological concomitants of transformative experiences (see inset).

In his book *The Evolution of Integral Consciousness*, Haridas Chaudhuri wrote, “The more we understand the essential structure of the universe as a

whole, the more we gain insight into the essential structure of man. The more we understand the essential structure of man, the more we gain insight into the unfathomable mystery of being.” And yet while the goal of science is objectivity, transformation lies in the realm of direct experience. To live deeply into a new mode of perception requires us to cultivate certain essential capacities such as staying present, maintaining nonjudgmental awareness, and developing conscious attention and deepened insight. In this research we are asking how we can we become more aware of life’s numinous and vital essences, and nurture life-affirming and engaging virtues in our everyday experiences. As interviewee Zenkei Blanche Hartman notes: “When we realize this is it, this is my life, just as I am, we begin to take care of it. Right here is the whole universe and each of us is Buddha. We have the realization that we are not separate from all beings. Not one. Not two. Just be here and fully embrace things as they are.”

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*A report on preliminary findings from the Transformation Project is available upon request.
Contact research@noetic.org.*