




The process of spiritual transformation to attain *Nafs al-muṭma'innah* in Islamic psychology

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Positive changes or transformations have been the subject of study within spiritual traditions as well as humanistic and transpersonal psychology. The aim of the current study is to understand the process of transformation among Moslems in Indonesia, who follow spiritual practices, to achieve the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* [tranquil self]. Ten participants in Yogyakarta province were involved in this study. They were recruited using *nafs al-muṭma'innah* scale developed by the authors. In-depth interviews of both the participants and their significant others were conducted. To analyse the data, an interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed. Five themes emerged from the data, including deviation from the basis of religious environment, spiritual discipline, transformative experiences, new characters and a continuous process. We conclude that participants experience spiritual-religious transformation and achieve the state of *nafs al-muṭma'innah* [tranquil self]. The process of transformation occurs gradually after a sudden experience, and it continuously happens throughout the course of life. Three factors contribute to the transformation, including the role of predisposition, the role of a spiritual guide and the role of spiritual experiences.

Contribution: As the study of spiritual-religious transformation is mainly conducted within a Judea-Christian tradition, this study significantly contributes to the literature by providing spiritual-religious transformation from an Islamic-Sufi perspective.

Keywords: spiritual transformation; Islamic psychology; transpersonal psychology; *nafs al-muṭma'innah*; phenomenological analysis.

Introduction

Positive changes or transformations have been the subject of study within humanistic psychology (Naor & Mayseless 2017), positive psychology (Garbarino 2011) and spiritual-religious traditions (Weber 2021). The phenomenon of transformation in psychology has been extensively studied in several forms, such as life transforming, transforming self (Cox & McAdams 2012), growth, personal growth (Boyd & Williams 2010; Geise 2008), personal growth initiative (Beri & Jain 2016), post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004) and psychological growth (Vansteenkiste & Ryan 2013). These terms have almost the same meaning, which is related to positive changes in individuals.

Within the religious tradition, Hood, Hill and Spilka (1996) suggested that spiritual-religious transformation includes, among others, a profound change in the self, not simply a matter of maturation, but through a process either sudden or gradual. In this study, we define spiritual-religious transformation as a type of spiritual experience to reach self-awareness, which occurs within a social context and entails a religious framework. The consequence of this change is radical, where an individual has a new centre of concern, interest and behaviours. This new sense of self is perceived as 'higher' (Hermans 2013).

The phenomena of spiritual-religious transformation are common among adults with both strong and less religious backgrounds. Smith (2006) conducted a national survey of spiritual transformation in the United States (US). He found that spiritual-religious change experiences are common in the US, with 50.0% of Americans having undergone the transformation. Of those reporting change, about 65.0% reported being 'born again'. Another national survey in the US conducted by Krause, Pargament and Ironson (2017) found that 55.7% of the participants reported that they had experienced a religious transformation.

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Halama and Halamova (2005) found that religious transformation was a deeply emotional and life-changing experience. The changes included strengthening the faith, a greater sense of meaning in life, a stronger sense of self-worth, greater optimism and stronger social relationships. Also, Smith (2006) found that most of the subjects experiencing transformation reported a strengthening of faith, followed by changes in character, such as being more understanding and helpful, and stopping perceived bad habits, such as drinking and drug use. Similarly, Pargament (2006) pointed out that the changes resulting from spiritual-religious experience not only involved spiritual and religious life but also the change in values and meanings, as well as the cognitive, behavioural, and social life.

Most of the studies on spiritual-religious transformation, however, were conducted among Christians and from Western psychological perspectives (Schultz et al. 2014; Tassell-Matamua & Frewin 2019; Williamson & Hood 2013). Very few studies have been conducted among Moslems and from the perspective of Islamic-Sufi psychology. This research, therefore, is intended to fill the gap.

Sufism and spiritual transformation of the Nafs

Nafs is one of the central concepts in Islamic-Sufi psychology (Rothman 2018). The term '*nafs*' has similarities to the term 'self' in contemporary psychology. However, both have differences. Rothman and Coyle (2018) stated that the term 'self' in modern psychology refers to complex psychological concepts that are immaterial. In the perspective of Islamic-Sufi psychology, the *nafs* contains spiritual elements (soul) as well as physical and psychological elements. According to Rothman (2018), the Arabic word *nafs* is best translated as the entire soul of the human being, including the self. In this paper, we use the term '*nafs*' interchangeably between soul and to as self.

Most of the Islamic-Sufi literature suggests three levels of the *nafs*. Al Ghazali (2014), a renowned Sufi figure, described three stages of *nafs*. Firstly, the *nafs al-ammârah* [tyrannical self]. In this stage, people are controlled by their desires. They tend to follow primitive instincts, lust and anger. They are full of hatred, greed, jealousy, backbiting and other evil deeds. Secondly, the *nafs al-lawwâmah* [regretful self], where the conscience is awakened. People in this stage strive for perfection, but their desires and lust are so powerful that they commit sinful deeds. As a result, they repent, and feel remorse, regret, guilt, shame and embarrassment. They try to avoid sin, but sometimes they commit a sin and later regret it. Thirdly, the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* [tranquil self], where a state of serenity and contentment has been reached. At this stage, people feel at peace. They only desire good things and leave bad manners behind. They have firm faith, relieve themselves of all worldly problems and are content with God's will. In this research, we focus on the transformation process from the lower to the higher self.

According to Rothman (2018, 2021), the human project of development includes two processes: *jihadun nafs* [struggle of the soul] and *tazkiyat an-nafs* [purification of the soul]. The struggle of the soul occurs when an individual struggles from *nafs al-ammârah* to achieve *nafs al-lawwâmah*. Meanwhile, the process of struggling from *nafs al-lawwâmah* to *nafs al-muṭma'innah* is called purification of the *nafs*. Both concepts are frequently used interchangeably. They can be used to indicate the process of struggling the soul at any level.

Rothman (2018:1738) defined *tazkiyat an nafs* as 'a deep process of inner work to purify and perfect the soul to allow it to shine in its highest state ...'. According to Al Ghazali (2000), this process includes going through three phases of purification of the soul. Firstly, *takhalli* [purifying the soul from reprehensible attributes], which involves removing negative qualities of character and behaviour. Secondly, *tahalli* [adorning the soul with noble and praiseworthy attributes], where an individual should struggle to fill the soul with good moral character or the process of 'beautifying yourself with the beautiful qualities' (Rothman 2021:157). Thirdly, *tajalli* [attaining a pure soul], which indicates the result of the process of purifying the *nafs*.

The process of purification of the soul and/or self requires spiritual-religious transformation. In Sufi psychology, the term transformation is used interchangeably with the terms psychological growth and personal development: the process of changing of the soul to reach a higher self, the tranquil *nafs* (Frager & Fadiman 2012). In contemporary psychology literature, many concepts have been developed that are similar to the characteristics of the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* [tranquil self]. Some of these concepts are as follows: peace of mind (Gale & Sultan 2013), peace (Boyd-Wilson & Walkey 2015), inner peace (Liu et al. 2015), enlightenment (Boyd-Wilson & Walkey 2015), mindfulness (Loo et al. 2014) and serenity (Kruse 1999). These terms refer to the positive human optimal function. Altiner (1986) referred to human true happiness. Boyd-Wilson and Walkey (2015) considered that individuals have found their true selves. In psychosynthesis terms, it is called a true self-discovery (Assagioli 1965). For Maslow (2012), an individual is considered to have achieved self-actualisation with a high level of maturity.

The study of the profiles of individuals who have reached a high level of self-actualisation and maturity is important to have an idea of how their condition is and the process to achieve it. Maslow (2012:30) said, 'The study of such healthy people can teach us much about our own mistakes, our shortcomings, the proper directions in which to grow'. When individuals are able to achieve this optimal capacity, they will be able to encourage others to achieve the same, which, in turn, will be able to shape the culture of the community and create a better world (Maslow 2012). Therefore, this article aims to understand: (1) The process of transformation to achieve a higher self in an Islamic-Sufi context, which is called *nafs al-muṭma'innah*? (2) What factors make the participants change?

Method

In this study, we adopt a phenomenological research approach (Roxburg et al. 2015). We consider this qualitative approach to be the most suitable for our study, because we intend to provide an account of lived experience of participants in their own terms and put aside pre-existing theoretical preconceptions.

We selected participants in this study by administering *Nafs al-muṭma'innah* scale developed by Trimulyaningsih (2021). The inclusion criteria were: (1) participants obtained the category of a high score on the *nafs al-muṭma'inna* scale, (2) participants practiced a spiritual discipline either inside or outside a *tariqa* group and, (3) participants were willing to participate in the study. Based on these criteria, we recruited nine participants. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants.

After obtaining an ethical approval from the Faculty of Psychology, Gadjah Mada University, we conducted in-depth interviews of the participants at their homes, in Yogyakarta Special Provinces, Indonesia. All participants signed informed consent to participate in this study. The frequency of interviews varied between 2 to 6 times with a duration of one to two hours. We also conducted interviews with their significant other to provide triangulation and additional information.

The data obtained were transcribed as a first step to perform data analysis using the interpretative phenomenological analysis technique (IPA) (La Kahija 2018). We followed the following steps: (1) reading and re-reading transcribed interview; (2) initial noting by making descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments; (3) developing emergent themes, these themes were then grouped into different superordinate themes; (4) searching for connections across themes; (5) moving to the next case; and (6) looking for patterns across cases (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009).

Results

The result of the phenomenological data analysis indicated that all participants experienced spiritual-religious transformation. They experienced a change from the lower self to the higher self. The detail of participants' experience of transformation can be seen in five superordinate themes

TABLE 1: The socio-demographic data of the participants.

Participants	Gender	Age	Education	Tariqa
TT1	Male	55	Undergraduate	No
MR2	Male	56	Undergraduate	<i>Shadziliya-Naqsabandiya (Mu'tabara)</i>
DN3	Female	61	Undergraduate	<i>Qodiriyya-Naqsabandiya (Mu'tabara)</i>
SN4	Male	50	High School	No
MM5	Male	42	Master	<i>Qodiriyya-Naqsabandiya (Mu'tabara)</i>
LD6	Female	57	Undergraduate	<i>Shattairiyya (Mu'tabara)</i>
RM7	Male	62	Undergraduate	No
SM8	Male	38	Undergraduate	<i>Chistiyya (Mu'tabara)</i>
SR9	Female	49	High School	No
FJ10	Male	48	High School	<i>Shadziliya</i>

Note: Tariqa refers to the Sufi groups participants joined.

we found from the phenomenological data analysis, namely: (1) deviation from the basis of religious environment; (2) spiritual discipline; (3) transformative experience; (4) new character and attitude and, (5) continuous process and community services.

Deviations from the basis of religious environment

Most participants in this study had a strong religious background biologically. They were the descendants of highly religious or spiritual figures, and they also grew up in a religious environment. For example, the families of participants TT1, DN3, SR9 and MM5 were followers of *tariqa*. Even though RM's father was a soldier, his grandfather was a *kyai* [religious leader] who ran a *pesantren* [Islamic boarding school]. Since childhood, he was accustomed to perform un-obligatory fasting. FJ10's father even memorised the Qur'an, and his grandfather was also a *kyai*. This is similar to MR2, whose father's mother were also a *kyai*. This data suggested that participants have a potency for a good spiritual life.

Even though participants were raised in a religious family, some of them searched for their own identity and spirituality. For example, when he was in college, TT1 began to feel the desire to explore religion and spirituality. He began to perform spiritual disciplines by living on the street as a homeless man and dressed up strangely. Some of the participants lived away from religious values. RM7 and SM8 considered that their youth life was full of darkness. They considered their youth life was full of darkness:

'I often got drunk because my friends drank too.' (SM8)

For participant SM8, his involvement in an environmentalist group dissolved him in what he called a 'wild life'. The religious provisions he had brought from the religious school (*pesantren*) and the *tariqa* seemed to have been forgotten. SM8 also liked to have fun by getting into the alley of Harley Davison bikers.

Spiritual discipline

Various motives encourage participants to carry out spiritual search, including the desire to get closer to Allah (TT1), the desire to change (RM7), spiritual interest (MR2), social support (LD6), the effect of reciting prayer (MM5) and meeting spiritual teachers (DN3, SN4).

In this process of spiritual search, participants practised various forms of spiritual discipline. For example, TT1 performed spiritual discipline by fasting, soaking himself in a river, practising *dhikr* (remembrance of God) during the day and performing late-night prayers. TT1 admitted that he performed these practices for nine years with the intention to get closer to Allah. Other participants carried out spiritual disciplines in accordance with the instructions

given by their spiritual guides. In addition, some participants also carried out un-obligatory fasting (MR2, DN3, SR9, SN4, LD6), read the Qur'an (TT1, RM7, MR2, SR9, LD6), stayed silent in a mosque (TT1), stayed in the state of wudu [ablution] (MM5, LD6) and maintain physical and spiritual purity (DN3). Apart from staying in the state of wudu, DN3 also practised almsgiving. Almost every day, DN3 went around the city to distribute food to people living on the street. This was done for many years. Some participants described their spiritual disciplines:

'Fasting, waking up at night, for the means [to cleanliness of heart]. The process is like that.' (SN4)

'Cultivating the spirit by fasting, by staying awake.' (SN4)

'I like practising *Daud* fasting [by fasting on one day and not fasting on the next day] in high school. When I was in college, sometimes, I fasted on Monday and Thursday.' (LD6)

'[I did] self-isolation, by contemplating, or reading the Quran.' (RM7)

'... meeting [with] righteous people ... raises the spirit. Then, practice dhikr together to strengthened our faith.' (MM5).

In carrying out these spiritual practices, several participants mentioned the importance of the role of a spiritual guide, either within a *tariqa* – known as a *murshid* – or outside the *tariqa*. For example, during the search process, SN4 stated that the guidance, supervision and teaching of teachers had an important role. MM5 also said that the role of a *murshid* was vital in providing guidance in the learning process. MM5 stated that he was very obedient to his teacher. After meeting the spiritual teacher, TT1 felt that his relationship with God was getting stronger. According to TT1, the role of the teacher in his transformation is to provide guidance in living the unity of Allah, provide support and encouragement, become partners for discussion, become a source of inspiration, as well as provide lessons about life and wisdom. MM5 also experienced the same thing and was very obedient to his spiritual guide. The obedience to spiritual guides made the transformation possible.

For RM7, the role of spiritual guide was to open his heart to the spiritual reality. Before the transformation, RM7 felt that his life was like being in a closed and dark cube. After performing spiritual practices under the guidance of a *murshid*, RM7 dreamed that his heart was being pierced by a golden heart-shaped arrow. Instead of feeling pain, RM7 experienced that the arrow liberated and enlightened him. At that time, the cube walls opened and RM7 felt as if he was losing his sense of self. His spiritual guide explained it as a process of *fana' fi-Allah* [losing self before the Divine]:

'... [When] I started practicing these disciplines, I dreamt that there was a yellow arrow with a heart-like tip, golden yellow, glowing. I don't know where it came from, but it suddenly shot here [towards the centre of my chest]. But what I felt was not pain ... [It was] like freedom, it was enlightening, I was lost. My self is gone.' (RM7)

Most participants narrated that their spiritual guides assisted them in the process of transformation. For example, initially

MR2 focussed that his life was to learn and practice spirituality in Islam (*haqika*), and he did not pay attention to Islamic Law (*Sharia*). This created an imbalance. It was his spiritual guide who taught him to live a balanced life by practising both the inner and outer aspects of Islam. Meanwhile, SM8 felt that the *bay'ah* [allegiance] undertaken to enter a *tariqa* group had strengthen his practice. With this pledge, SM8 was more consistent in spiritual discipline.

Transformative experiences

Most of the participants shared various spiritual experiences in the process of transformation. TT1 said that while he was doing *dhikr* one day, he felt he had entered another world that he called as the afterlife. He described the place as being empty and bright. At that time, he only remembered Allah. This experience was interpreted as the first stage of death, and it led to many changes in TT1's life. One time, TT1 felt a great happiness without knowing why. He felt a deep meaning in life after understanding about his life's duties as a Qur'an teacher and community educator.

MR2 shared their experiences of crossing other realms while practising *dhikr*. Firstly, MR2 saw himself dead, then he was buried and his body was eaten by insects. He felt that he was taken to *Padang Mahsyar*, the meeting place of all humans to receive judgement after the doomsday. MR2 described the *Mahsyar* as a very wide place. He said:

'The land is unlimited sand, and the sky is also unlimited. There is no sun but [it is very] bright.' (MR2)

The spiritual experiences of participants might occur in a dream's state. One such participant was SN4. He insisted that his dreams feel like real. For example, SN4 suggested that his dream was not only in his mind, but his whole body experienced the dream. In one of his dreams, SN4 met several important figures who had died. Aside from SN4, MM5 also had a lot of experiences in his dreams. When he was young, MM5 dreamed of meeting a person who was exactly the same as himself:

'The face is exactly the same, the stance is the same, the height is the same, the body is the same.' (MM5)

Besides that, MM5 met many spirits, such as jinn and demons, in dreams. He interpreted it as an obstacle to his transformation. After MM5 practiced certain spiritual disciplines, the disturbance of the jinn and devils in the dreams disappeared. Since then, MM5 dreamed about a lot of spiritual figures who had died. MM5 even had a dream of meeting the Prophet Muhammad, which is regarded as a very special dream in the Islamic tradition.

Emerging sub-themes

We identified four different sub-themes under within the three main themes, namely: (1) balance of integration, (2) increasing awareness, (3) noble character and (4) continuous process.

Balance of integration

We identified two forms of balance from the participants' narratives. Firstly, the balance between rationality and feeling, and secondly, the balance between the inner and outer of Islam. The balance between rationality and feeling is evident in RM7's experience. Firstly, RM7 was a very rational person. He learned a lot about the philosophy of religion and theology. After going on a spiritual journey under close guidance of his spiritual teacher, RM7 began to learn to use 'feeling or intuition'. *'To approach Allah we could not use reason, but using our feeling instead, because Allah is the Subtle One'*. RM7 continued that since using his feeling in knowing God, the capacities of his two minds developed: the rationality and intuition.

Secondly, the balance between inner and outer aspects of Islam could be seen in MR2's experiences. He narrated that when he was young, he would practice a lot of spiritual disciplines in *tariqa* and had various spiritual experiences. But when he got married, he met a woman who had a very strong Sharia background. This caused him in conflict with his wife. MR2 left the *tariqa* and studied Sharia Law. This was required to preserve a good relationship, not only with his wife but also with his neighbour. However, when he left the *tariqa*, he felt that his heart had gotten empty. He, then, learned how to live a balanced life between the inner [*tariqa*] and outer [*Sharia*] aspects of Islam.

Increasing awareness

In addition to the emergence of a balanced life, participants also felt an increase in awareness, including awareness of oneself, of others and of the Divine.

Increased self-awareness was seen in DN3. Apart from getting spiritual experiences, that increased his belief in God, DN3 also realised that she had been arrogant – felt being the most religious person and the person who performed prayer the most. In SR9's case, the self-awareness could be seen from the understanding of the life problems she endured. SR9 regarded her problems as a way of God to remove her sins in the past. Participant SN4 also stated that he continues to learn to get rid of his self-centred tendency.

The participants' awareness of others also increased, such as awareness to respect other human beings. This is evident in the experiences of participant DN3, who always tried to respect all people. She believed that all the fellow human beings were from God. Participant TT1 narrated that when he performed a spiritual discipline by being a homeless man, he often interacted with a Catholic priest at a church, who provided him with a shelter for sleeping. As a religious healer, he did not differentiate his guests by their religions. Apart from fellow Muslims, TT1 said that he also welcomed Buddhists, Christians, and Hindu guests who came for help or for discussions. Meanwhile, MM5 continued to strive to live a beneficial life for others: to respect all humans and to love all creatures.

Many participants experienced an increase in Divine awareness. For example, TT1 participants learned to see God in everything, and also to view every problem with the perspective of monotheism. TT1 received monotheistic learning by his spiritual teacher; it can be seen in an idiom in the Javanese speech:

'So ... that Allah will always be with us anywhere at any time.'
(TT1)

DN3 also stated that he felt he was never alone because he believed there was always God wherever he was. DN3 feels very confident because experiences provide evidence. SN4 stated that if he does something, he always sees all the results as being the will of Allah alone. Everything that happens, he sees as God's doing. SN4 adheres to the monotheism taught by his teacher.

Noble character

Participants showed positive changes in their mental conditions, attitudes, behaviour and characters that developed through their various life experiences, such as patience, surrender, contentment, peace of mind, wisdom and happiness.

Patience was shown by FJ10. His wife saw FJ10 as a person who never got angry. 'Almost never got angry'. (FJ10). When faced with a problem, FJ10 chose to surrender and asked his wife to pray and surrender. Other participant, LD6, stated that after following the practice of the *tariqa*, surrender became the main attitude in her life. LD6 always felt having enough and satisfied with what she had got. She was happy and accepted what Allah had given to her:

'... [*life*] is simple. Praise be to Allah, I feel very happy.' (LD6)

When MM5 faced life's difficulties, he was always patient, resigned to his fate and surrender to God. MM5 also accepted what happened to him and felt having enough with what he received. Belief in Allah could also be seen from SR9's actions; she would see the good message behind any incidents. She would not blame anyone for the bad things in her life. She always returned everything to God.

Calmness of the heart or peace of mind was the main mental condition mentioned by participants. FJ10 believed that a calm heart was important for someone standing before God. Peace of mind would lead someone to leave worldly things and face God with confidence. SM8 felt calm because he has found his goal in life, namely to prepare for the afterlife:

'If you want peace of mind, then don't have any weird desires anymore. Before, I always wanted to buy the Harley Davidson motor bike. I used to sell one, then I bought another Harley Davidson ...' (SM8)

Similarly, TT1 felt that he found his purpose in life to worship God by providing services and education to the community. TT1 admitted that he never doubted his way of life. This was the wisdom of life TT1 learned from his spiritual guide:

'Many things, about life ... [*a*]bout wisdom of life' (TT1).

Apart from being calm, the participants also felt happy. For DN3, every time she woke up in the morning, she would ask herself to be happy. DN3 felt contentment in her life. She did not want to be dependent on anyone or anything, except God. For TT1, he always remembered a message from his spiritual teacher that people would be able to live happily if they live according to their life duties. Meanwhile, MR2 narrated that once he had a feeling of happiness that could not be described in words:

'I felt unlimited happiness. [I felt it] already. God pleased has entered ... Yes, when we have met Allah, we would feel happy and joy ... happier than meeting our own girlfriends.' (MR2)

Continuous process

Most of the participants stated that the transformation process that they had experienced was not finished and had yet to continue. They continued to improve their quality of life. For example, TT1 said that the process he was undertaking was still taking place slowly, continuously and step by step. As time went by, TT1 felt that he became more mature. Meanwhile, SR9 stated that all of the positive changes still needed to be improved continuously. According to SN4, this awareness was important as a 'spiritual traveller' to follow a never-ending transformation. With his profession as a religious healer, he set his mind to learn from various sources, such as from other traditional healers he visited and from his own patients. According to SN4, in this learning process, it is highly important to have a strong foundation, namely monotheism (*tawheed*), because there were many temptations and tests. For MM5, the most important thing for him was to keep on purifying his heart. Even in this process, MM5 still followed the direction of his spiritual guide. MM5 felt he was still undergoing a learning process.

Apart from continuing the process, the participants also showed their efforts to contribute to the communities. For example, TT1 served as a healer to educate people towards monotheism (*tawheed*). This dedication was a way to share knowledge with family, community and society to apply monotheism in everyday life. Similarly, FJ10 had an active role in educating the community through his role as a religious teacher. DN3 explicitly stated that serving to God was not only by performing religious rituals but also by serving fellow human beings. Meanwhile, SN4 continued to contribute to his community through healing practices. MM5 always tried to educate people in his community. For LD6, she found meaning in life by contributing to society.

Discussion

In this study, we found that all participants experience spiritual-religious transformation. They experienced a change from the *nafs al-ammârah* [lower self] towards *nafs al-muţma'innah* [higher self]. Participants described their life before transformation as being full of anger, indulging in their unnecessary desires, searching for pleasures, drinking alcohol, fighting, being self-centred and chasing possessions.

These are all the characteristics of *nafs al-ammârah* [lower self]. Before achieving the *nafs al-muţma'innah* [higher self], an individual will attain a *nafs al-lawwamah* [transition self]. Normally, an individual has always been trying to distance from the lower self but still cannot achieve the higher self. Sometimes he and/or she is influenced by the higher self and sometimes by the *nafs al-ammârah* [lower self]. It is a battleground between positive and negative forces. When the positive force is more settled, an individual begins to achieve the *nafs al-muţma'innah* [higher self]. This is indicated by their character of patience, surrender, contentment, peace of mind, wisdom and happiness. They also experienced the existence of a higher self which directed them to carry out good deeds. They respect all humans and love all creatures.

Several previous studies found that the transformation process can be a sudden or a gradual process (Hood et al. 1999). Most participants in this research show that they undergo a gradual process of transformation. However, within this gradual process, they had some spiritual experiences which triggered transformation. For example, when FJ10 was involved in juvenile delinquency, he often drank alcohol and was fighting. One day, he fought until he almost died. At that time, suddenly, he had awareness that he needed to change his life. This sudden transformation became the beginning of his gradual transformation. All participants in this study experienced a similar process of transformation, either sudden or gradual. Therefore, we argue that sudden and gradual transformation is not a clear distinction.

Three important factors may contribute to the transformation, namely: (1) the role of predisposition, (2) the role of a spiritual guide and, (3) the practice of a spiritual discipline.

The role of predisposition

Most of the participants in the study narrated that they had a family background of religious and spiritual leaders, both their parents directly, as well as their grandparents and the generations above. There is evidence that they have a tendency towards spirituality since the beginning of life. Although during their young life, they were influenced into a negative life, they eventually returned to the path of spirituality like their ancestors.

It is out of the scope of this paper to discuss the biological basis of religion and spirituality. However, since the early history of modern science, experts have looked for biological, psychological and social explanation of religious and spiritual phenomena. The idea of religious instinct emerged in the previous 20 centuries. For example, William McDougal stated that religious and spiritual instincts were a combination of several other instincts, including a sense of curiosity, fear and subjection (Spilka et al. 2003). Recently, some neuroscientist tried developing a neuroethology scholarship. There is some evidence to suggest that the dorsomedial frontal cortex mediates the readiness for religious experiences (Azari et al. 2001). However, some studies suggested that

although there is a neuropsychological basis of spirituality, but it is not directed to a specific area of the brain.

The most controversial theory of God gene hypothesis has been debated recently. Hamer (2005), a geneticist, wrote a book entitled 'How faith is hardwired into our genes'. He proposed that human spirituality is influenced by heredity with a specific gene called vesicular monoamine transporter 2 (VMAT2), which predisposes humans towards spiritual experiences. Several empirical studies have been conducted to prove this hypothesis (Silveira 2008). In this paper, we either not support or reject this hypothesis. We only provide data that participants of this study come from religious families either by direct parents or their previous generation.

The role of a spiritual guide

Participants in this study suggested the significant role of a spiritual guide in their process of transformation. They used the term 'Guru' to refer to spiritual guide, both inside and outside *tariqa* (Sufi order). In the Sufi tradition, the term often used is 'Murshid' or 'Shaykh'. Indonesian Muslims use the term 'Guru', because of the influence of Hindu and Buddhist traditions, which used to be the largest religions before Islam came to Indonesia. A number of participants conveyed the role of spiritual guides, which included opening the spiritual dimension, providing guidance, providing interpretation of participant experiences, guidance, supervision and teaching.

In Sufism, the role of a spiritual guide is vital (Anam 2017). Frager (2013) narrated his personal experience of how a *murshid* guides from the process of spiritual transformation he is experiencing. His initial encounter with a *murshid* from Turkey was just a few seconds of eye contact through the slit of his office door. However, this brief encounter was the starting point for the transformation process in Frager's life. Therefore, Frager (2013) emphasises the role of *murshid* in opening the hearts of his followers to a spiritual path. This was also experienced by participants in this study.

For example, participant RM7 gave an interesting metaphor of the spiritual opening process he experienced in dreams. He described his heart as a closed box. In a dream, he saw an arrow with a golden tip and heart-shaped slide into the box and opened it. RM7 described the arrows as enlightening and liberating him.

After opening a disciple's heart, the *murshid* provides spiritual guidance and instruction through various rituals. Anam (2017) described the relationship between a *murshid* and his followers as doctors and patients. A *murshid* provides healing for diseases in the hearts of students, then cleanses them so that their followers can reach a *nafs al-muṭma'innah* [higher spiritual stage]. Recently in the psychology literature, the role of the therapist is known as a guide for clients to achieve spiritual transformation (Jones 2010).

The role of a *murshid* in Sufism, which is illustrated by the experiences of the participants, is similar to the role of the *guru* in the Hindu tradition. The *guru* is a central figure in the Hindu tradition. Among the roles of *guru* is to help an individual to achieve liberation, contentment and freedom in the form of *moksha* and inner perfection. Similarly, the role of *guru* in Buddhism is considered essential. For a Buddhist devotee, the *guru* is an enlightened teacher who has mastered the ritual. Initiation is necessary before a student is permitted to practice a particular prayer (Berkwitz 2009). Likewise, participants in this study also narrated that they had to take initiate by promising allegiance, called *bay'ah* in Sufism, to indicate that they become a student and to perform particular rituals. Participants in this article suggested that *bay'ah* is important to strengthen them to carry out rituals consistently.

The role of spiritual experiences

Participants in this study gained various experiences in the transformation process, both religious and mystical-spiritual experiences. According to Hood et al. (2009), religious experiences are a variety of experiences that are framed within a religious system. Meanwhile, transcendental experiences, such as experiences of losing oneself and a sense of ultimate unity, can be categorised as spiritual experiences. An example of religious experience in this research is DN3's experience when she faced various life problems: starting from a divorce, being cheated by people, losing a car, to a failed business. She interpreted this as a reprimand from Allah for giving little alms. Meanwhile, other participants had experiences that are more spiritual. For example, when TT1 performed *dhikr*, he suddenly felt like he had entered the realm after death. He described the place as empty and bright. Meanwhile MR2 has many spiritual experiences in dreams, where he meets someone exactly like himself. He interpreted this as self-discovery.

Participants in this study indicated that they experienced various kinds of changes after carrying out spiritual rituals and disciplines. The change represents spiritual transformation (Hood et al. 2009). The first characteristic of spiritual experience is a profound change in the self. MR2 explained that he experienced the existence of a higher self than his ordinary self; he called it a spirit (soul). It is this spirit that directed him to carry out good deeds. Williamson and Hood (2013) suggested that the new sense of self is perceived as 'higher' or as emancipation from a previous dilemma or predicament. In this research, self-change is also associated with death and entering another dimension of realm. TT1 had an experience of entering the realm of death.

Another characteristic of transformation that emerged in this study is balance. For MR2, he found a balance between following Sharia Law and Sufism [mystical tendencies]. For other participants, it is important for them to involve themselves in spiritual practices, and at the same time, they need to devote themselves to other people in the society,

hence a balance between the divine orientation and the human orientation. Paloutzian (2005) states for the people who undergo transformation, ‘... they come to a point of equilibrium between the components of their meaning system ...’. In the perspective of Sufism, balance is a very important principle. This can be read in detail in Frager’s book (2013) entitled: *Heart, self, & soul: The Sufi psychology of growth, balance, and harmony*.

However, the stage of *nafs al-mutma’innah* is not a static condition. The influence of the lower self can come back anytime. This is the rationale the participants in this study stated as why they keep continuing the process of transformation. SN4 described that it is a ‘never-ending process ...’

Conclusion

This study found that the participants experienced spiritual-religious transformation and achieved the state of *nafs al-mutma’innah* [tranquil self]. The process of transformation occurred gradually after a sudden experience, and it continuously happened throughout the course of life. During the process of transformation, participants found both transformative experiences, involving both spiritual and religious transformation. Three factors may contribute to the transformation, including the role predisposition, the role of a spiritual guide and the role of spiritual experiences. The role of a spiritual guide is pivotal to provide guidance, to open the heart to spiritual realm and to interpret participants’ experiences during the journey. We found that the positive changes include the change of the sense of self, the emergence of noble characters (being patient, surrender to God, being happy with what you have) and experiencing calm and happiness.

Based on this research, we suggest that more research needs to be done on the experience of transformation within different religious and social contexts to see the similarities and differences in each tradition. The issue of biological basis of religious and spiritual experiences is a complex area of research that does not only focus on experimental laboratory methods. The phenomenological, historical, case study and longitudinal approaches need to be considered.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors’ contributions

N.T and M.A.S. were involved in the conceptualisation, writing of the original draft, review and editing. K.W.Y. was responsible for supervision.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Gadjah Mada University and ethics consent was received on 19 July 2019. The ethics approval number is 5467/UN1/FPSi.1.3/SD/PT/2019.

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Data availability

Data are not publicly available because of confidentiality agreements with the study’s participants.

Disclaimer

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