

inquire within

*Self-reflection is the first step
in breaking patterns and tendencies
that no longer serve you.*

Samskara saksat karanat purvajati jnanam

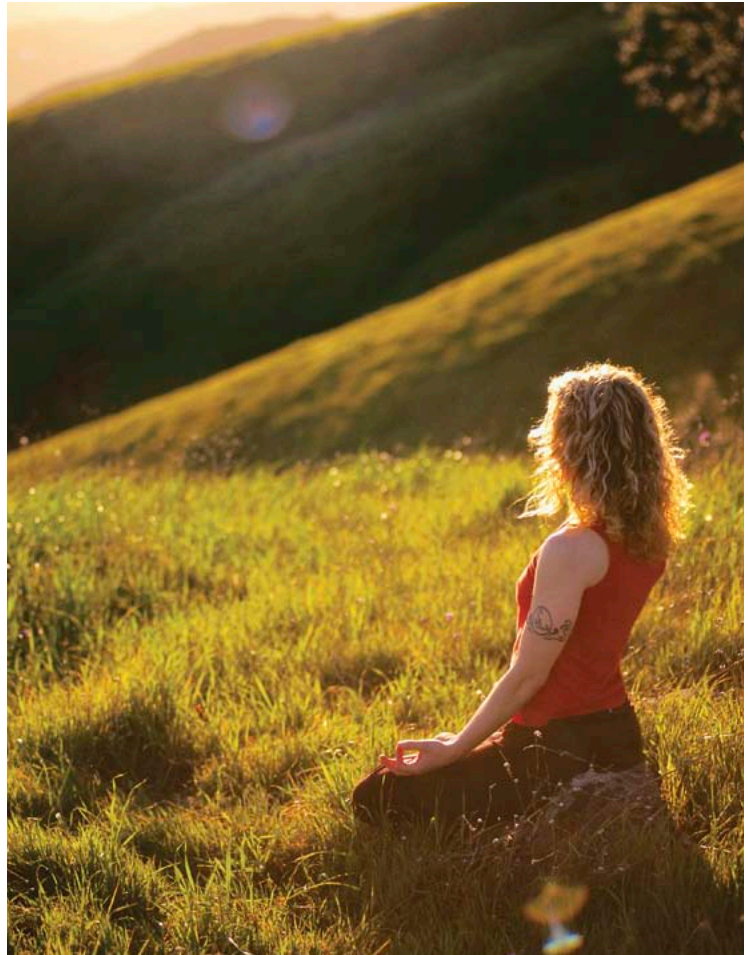
Through sustained focus and meditation on our patterns, habits, and conditioning, we gain knowledge and understanding of our past and of how we can change the patterns that aren't serving us to live more freely and fully.

Yoga Sutra III.18

One of my students came to see me recently, feeling frustrated. “I can’t believe I did this to myself,” she said. “I told my boss I could work this weekend to finish a grant proposal, but I also said I’d help with the sixth-grade bake sale at my daughter’s school. Plus, a friend of mine is coming to town, and I told her she could stay with me, and I invited a bunch of our mutual friends over for brunch. So it’s going to be another crazy weekend, and I was really craving some downtime. I just wish I didn’t always overcommit myself like this.”

If you’re like most people, chances are, you’ve had occasion to say to yourself, “Why do I always do that?” Maybe you tend to take on too much, like my student, or to lose your temper, or to start projects but not finish them. At times it can feel like these tendencies are just a part of who you are. But in fact, they aren’t who you are—they’re habits. And though it’s not an easy process, you can change them.

In Yoga Sutra III.18, Patanjali explains that your *samskaras*—your habits, patterns, and conditioning—can be a point of focus for **refining the mind** and coming to a place of clearer perception. People often think of *samskaras* in terms of negative patterns, but healthy habits like brushing your teeth or exercising are *samskaras*, too. *Samskaras* generally develop in response to a



situation or circumstance, either slowly over a period of time or suddenly, as the result of a single strong or traumatic event. Growing up in a rough-and-tumble household, for example, you might develop a pattern of defending yourself aggressively, while experiencing a single harrowing event such as an earthquake or a violent crime can leave you with patterns like fearfulness or a mistrust of others.

Implicit in the definition of *samskaras* is that they can have a positive, negative, or neutral effect on you. A habit of getting up early every



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morning to meditate will likely have a positive effect, whereas habits like interrupting other people or being late to work are likely to have a negative effect. Whether a habit is positive or negative depends on both the person and the situation—one person’s habit of reticence might have a negative effect, creating problems for him because he can’t assert himself. But for another person, who volunteers her opinion so freely that no one else gets a chance to talk, reticence would be a positive habit for her to cultivate, with assertiveness being the negative pattern.

Similarly, a habit may serve you well at one point in your life but may need to be reassessed when it’s no longer serving you. When you are living in England, for example, you may develop the habit of driving on the left side of the road. This is great as long as you are in England, but when you get back to the United States, continuing to drive on the left side of the road will put you in danger.

The *samskaras*, or habitual ways of thinking and acting, that Patanjali is concerned with in Yoga Sutra III.18 are the ones that govern your behavior in ways that affect you negatively. These can be so ingrained that you don’t realize their full impact (or even see them as patterns) until you start a practice of self-reflection, which serves as a mirror to help you better see the places where you consistently get stuck—so that you can get unstuck and move forward.

LOOK BACK

In the third chapter of the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali explains that *samyama*, a practice of sustained, intense focus in a specific direction, helps you to refine the mind and achieve greater clarity, thereby reducing your agitation. This sustained focus, he tells us, has another important benefit: You inevitably learn something about the object of your focus. So if you commit to a practice of self-inquiry that focuses on your habits and patterns, you stand to learn something about your past and about how those patterns developed.

Most of the Yoga Sutra is notably unconcerned with the past. Yoga Sutra III.18 is one of the few sutras that mention the

past as a source of insight and information about how to move forward. Patanjali says that if you can become aware of patterns that may be tripping you up, and then reflect on them, you can discover the cause of those patterns and how they may have influenced you over time in a way that may be keeping you from your goal of greater clarity. This greater understanding of your past (*purvajati jnanam*) allows you to move forward to live more fully in the present—free from the compulsion to keep behaving in ways that cause you suffering and unhappiness.

COME UNSTUCK

The first step toward changing negative habits is a commitment to examining your patterns and habits through a process of self-reflection, or *svadhyaya*. This might naturally develop through an existing asana, breathing, meditation, or chanting practice, or you can develop this as a practice on its own.

Some of the *samskaras* you’d like to change are probably obvious to you, while others will reveal themselves more subtly. You become aware of some patterns directly in the moment (the remorse you feel after losing your temper, for example, or the regret you have over missing yet another opportunity to assert yourself). You may become aware of other patterns as a result of feedback from others (“You’re always late!”) or through ongoing reflection (“I could have been a little more compassionate with my neighbor”).

It’s important to note that Patanjali is not saying that a tendency to be short-tempered, timid, or anything else is a “bad” thing that you must change. Rather, the insight is meant to help support a process of self-discovery and personal transformation where you can actively choose and discern which patterns are no longer serving you and which ones you want to change. As you progress, this ability will benefit you in increasingly subtle but powerful ways, and ultimately it will help you to see—and act more fully from—your true Self.

Once you have become aware of a pattern that you want to change, spend some time reflecting on the qualities you’ll need

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to cultivate in order to change it: Is it the courage to stand up for yourself or to follow your dreams and write that novel or live overseas? Is it the patience to respond to stressful situations in a less volatile manner? Do you simply need to cultivate more discipline to complete tasks or leave the house on time? The answer to these questions is often complex, of course, and not necessarily easy to put into practice. It helps if you have a teacher, mentor, or even a trusted friend to help support you through the process.

ASSESS WITH PATIENCE

The next step is to set realistic goals for yourself and let go of self-judgment. While awareness and intention can be incredibly powerful, shifting a pattern can be a long and difficult process. It helps to incorporate a formal check-in at the end of each day. After whatever other practice you may be doing, or simply as you breathe comfortably and consciously before sleep, take a moment to appreciate your efforts in creating small (or big) changes and acknowledge, without judgment, those areas that still need improvement. If you can, give yourself an action to support your intention: “Tomorrow morning I will call my neighbor and apologize for being impatient with her yesterday” or “I will make an appointment with my boss to discuss my desire to take on more responsibility.”

Remember that you have the choice and the ability to create positive change in your life—you are not doomed to stay stuck in patterns that are not serving you. And don’t confuse yourself with your negative samskara. The behavior you wish to change is simply a pattern, and however ingrained or strong it is, it is not who you really are at your core.

Recognizing these pieces is yoga, differentiating the Self from the other and living consciously in the present moment. This practice gives you the opportunity to more fully realize the person you truly are and want to be in the world. ❖

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