

A man in a blue shirt and jeans is pulling a white cloth that reveals a landscape transition from a beach to a green field. The background is a dark, cloudy sky.

# Samskara: Breaking Patterns: Changing Reality

The great yogi Patanjali famously said, "Suffering that is yet to come is to be avoided". Nancy Jackson (Swami Dayananda) explores memory and how inquiry and meditation can use your past to influence your future.

**D**o you recognise the experience of hearing a few notes of a popular song and being transported back to the time when it was a hit? Or inhaling just a whiff of newly mowed grass and getting a whole memory download? Maybe a glimpse of a building or a touch of velvet bringing you to a time long ago.

These are examples of samskaras, from the Sanskrit word meaning impressions from life's experiences. They can be sensory, imbedded in sound, smell, taste, touch, and sight. Hundreds of sensory imprints are triggered on an ongoing basis in everyday life: from the ring of the mobile to the trademark of a favourite product.

They also are memories that carry emotional impact – a glorious day on a ski slope or the time, perhaps, you took someone to a hospital. A samskara can be deeply cut into your entire being. Not making the team because of an injury carries a samskara, so do accidents, awards, triumphs, and failures.

Some say that every time you sense, feel, think, will, or do anything, you create a samskara. Every moment of life is taken into your being.

Samskaras are known as activators. They spring forth from your deeper layers. Some may be as comfortable as marmalade on toast and others as treacherous as raging panic in the face of perceived danger. Think of samskaras as stored flotsam of experiences, beliefs, conversations, regrets, or images. Seemingly forgotten, they are more active than you might think. They temper the quality of your experiences in this instant and in the next. Although samskaras are about memories they set patterns for your future.

Maurice Nicoll, a Western philosopher in the Gurdjieff tradition, says, "When you see

that your past lies in front of you, then your thoughts about your past become useful."

If you're ready to respond differently to life's many challenges, you might find that investigating your samskaras will provide vital information for how to act now to shape tomorrow.

### Memory

Memory is the retention of experience. Some people have well-honed capabilities to remember facts or the order of events in time. Many also have physical memories in athletics, trades, or other talents. These are marked by accuracy, skillfulness, and consistency.

Scientists have long known that recording a memory requires adjusting the connections between nerve cells. These send messages across narrow gaps called synapses. To build a long-term memory, nerve cells create more stable pathways. Through repetition, hundreds of thousands of movements and experiences become integral to your life today, from learning to stand as a toddler to calculating a Sudoku puzzle.

How you respond to any of a wide range of everyday occurrences becomes ingrained. And every time you repeat an impression you reinforce a samskara. The more times you repeat, the stronger the pattern. A history teacher, for example, will remember dates, and an engineer will remember calculations. Repetition of a physical movement, such as clenching your jaw, becomes a habit.

Emotional memories are more malleable. The act of remembering itself can alter memory. Whatever is around you and your emotional state at the time of recollection affects its content.

Anyone can recognise the tendency to embellish or diminish elements

Every time you challenge your automatic responses, you have the possibility for change. Every moment you observe yourself rearranges the memory of the past.

of a story for dramatic effect. And in listening, you might notice that someone else's telling of events can become greatly distorted. In the same way, your memory can write your experiences, depending on your motivation at the time and your situation now. Consider the times when you have heard two people relate the same event. How different are their stories? You may even notice that you have changed some of your own stories along the way.

### Emotional memory

Impressions created from repetition of feeling form particularly powerful samskaras. Memories of the same emotional quality tend to connect. Thousands of incidents, events, conversations, and altercations throughout the course of life carry more or less emotional charge. Most people have a reserve of memories in emotional categories: the most frightening experiences, the sad ones, the funny ones, the times you were bullied, the achievements and disappointments. Everyone develops repetitive patterns of emotional responses.

These patterns become reinforced. The more you feel the responsive feeling, the more your pathways become well-trodden. Automatically, you may respond to many incidents according to your handful of

favoured responses. Depending on your tendencies, you may feel foolish, aggravated, despondent, jealous, self-righteous – or any of hundreds of emotions. If you take the time to notice these feelings you'll find a pattern of responding in a similar way in different situations, whether someone lies to you or you can't find a parking space.

Emotional baggage has the power to derail you at any moment. For example, is road rage about someone cutting you off and you could be physically injured? or is it also about feeling abused, or not considered, not treated with respect, placed in danger, or just plain inconvenienced? Similarly, if it's your first time at golf and you miss the ball, would it be your pattern to laugh it off, be embarrassed, carry on, or quit?

You have probably noticed that angry people react with anger in all sorts of situations. What are some of your common responses? Test it. The next time you can't get what you want, catch yourself at the very first instant. What thoughts arise? What emotions arise?

### Changing patterns

Our flexible memories, though unreliable, provide nurturing grounds for understanding. You've probably heard many tales of people who were glad in the end that they didn't get the job, the car, the house,

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the partner, or the pair of shoes because something better happened afterwards. They have rewritten their stories.

In the same way you have created emotional pathways, you can alter them. Every time you challenge your automatic responses, you have the possibility for change. Every moment you observe yourself rearranges the memory of the past.

Samskaras are known as seeds. Plant regrets and reap resentment. Plant compassion and reap generosity.

### Future struggle can be and should be avoided

Nicoll says, The tapestry of your life will continue to be woven in exactly the same way as in the past. If you do not act more consciously at a particular moment when things are difficult, you will continue to lay down in yourself the same pattern.

If you have ever felt that you could have handled something better, you'll find it helpful to reveal your automatic responses. Whenever possible, notice your emotional reactions, no matter how brief. Hold the feeling for a moment longer when you respond to praise or blame. What feelings arise when you hear a critical or cutting remark? Do you feel hurt and sadness or do you lash out in anger and blame.

How do you respond to opinions? If you agree, perhaps you feel expanded, joyful, or enthusiastic. If you disagree, you might feel irritated, defensive, or even disgusted. Have you noticed a pattern? Do you usually challenge or change the topic? Do you engage or walk away? Notice how you act with different people. You might indulge your friends but dispute your parents or children.

As they arise, review the series

of memories that comprises the underlying fabric of your life. Listen to your own stories.

### Self-Inquiry dissolves carried emotions

Self-inquiry is asking yourself questions for more understanding about your emotional state. If you are prepared to catch yourself at the moment of emotional reaction, the information you receive can be immensely helpful. As best you can, work with the information without judgement. Here is a sequence you can try.

- 1 What is my exact emotional reaction? As accurately as possible, name the feeling and say it aloud. For example, I feel disappointed. I want to blame. I never get it right.
- 2 In what way am I attached to the feeling? This one's tricky as you may not realise how attached you are to your own thoughts and reactions. You could ask yourself: Is this the only feeling that fits the moment? Is this a familiar feeling? Does this feeling sometimes take over? Do I have to feel this feeling? Can I drop it?
- 3 How would I want the pattern to be different? If you are tired of being reactive, or a victim, or filled with discontent, you can initiate change. Maybe you simply want to respond in different ways. Which response patterns would you prefer?
- 4 Catch yourself the next time. When the familiar thoughts and feelings arise, notice. Investigate them. It's a long-term process. You've created ingrained habits.
- 5 If possible, respond differently. Even if you only notice, you already are responding differently. If you still follow the old pattern, try again and again.

6 Look back. You may not even recognise when you change a pattern. In time, however, you'll be able to look back and notice you're different.

7 Forge the future. What emotional responses would you like to bring into your future? Maybe being able to respond appropriately, then let it go. Or being able to say the right thing at the right time. Possibly being gentler or more firm, stepping forward or backing off. It's your choice.

### Meditation releases the charge

Spending time in meditation decreases conscious thought and provides the arena to look more closely at your thoughts and feelings. When you take the time to sit, focusing on the breath, or a mantra,

or any other meditation technique, you allow thoughts and feelings to arise without engaging. Or if you do follow a train of thought, try to notice what triggers you and do some self-inquiry.

Nirvikalpa samadhi – the thought-free state of consciousness – is a refresher. Many of the yoga scriptures talk about it being the goal of meditation, achieved after long and hard effort. But you may find yourself in this state more than you realise, even for short snippets of time. You just have to look for it. You'll find thought-free consciousness in the space between notes in gentle music, or the moments between the exhale and inhale. As you experience your mind in meditation, you can find the space between thoughts. When the mind is completely silent, it becomes luminous.

Spending time in meditation decreases engrossing thought and provides the arena to look more closely at thoughts that carry intense feeling.

Meditation releases the charge. Allowing yourself to just sit brings acceptance, being able to embrace the entire experience without editing. Meditating provides a different sense of space. Images may arise – a person, a scene, a bit of conversation. As you continue to sit in meditation these disturbances settle.



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## Change your past to change your future

It's an unusual idea that you can change your past. Yet you do it every day. Your mind brings forth emotional attachments to memories you have chosen to reinforce or modify. The more the emotional entanglement, the more important it is to look at it. As you are constantly in the flux of changing impressions you are also in the flux of changing memories. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra 3.18 says, Through sustained focus and meditation on samskaras we gain knowledge.

Simply put, you don't need to react in the same way. You don't need to think or feel or identify in the same way. If you have suffered by your own thinking – not being good enough, or other people getting better, or feeling you didn't make the right choices – you don't need to suffer from the same thinking in the future. By dissolving your emotional habits you become less automatic. Nicoll says, "You don't have to be the person you think you should be. You can change your future by working on yourself now".

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# Dissolving the hold of samskaras

At any moment in the day, whether you're occupied or sitting in meditation, thought fragments or images arise. Many are neutral. They may engage your attention for a time, then dissolve. Some are positive, such as enthusiasm or excitement about an upcoming event. Many are drawn from memory and have emotional charge. If you can, capture the moment as though you're taking a photograph. Then inquire about the emotional charge.

When you investigate your samskaras they have less hold on you. Be courageous and clear in asking yourself What is the best way to shift my attachment? Here are some suggestions.

**Let go.** Memories without negative emotional bite resonate with a feeling of peace or expansion. If you have a samskara that carries tension, imagine releasing it. How would that feel? Often, as soon as you identify that you have been emotionally attached, you can let it go. If it's not that easy, consciously say I let go.

**Observe yourself.** As often as you can, even two or three times a day, watch your response to a singular situation. Rather than focusing on the circumstance or the possible outcome, carefully notice what you are thinking and feeling.

**Find your motivation.** Sometimes simply finding what you think you want is enough to release the grip of a samskara. Investigate possibilities: Do I wish this never happened? What did I want then and what do I want now? Be honest and voice your actual motivation. Sometimes you'll find you're holding onto something silly, like wanting a different outcome from an event from many years ago. This is great information to be able to let go.

**Cancel debts.** Go to the memory spot where the story is held. Ask yourself: What do I think I am owed? An apology, a new car, a promotion, appreciation? Release your desire: I no longer want an apology. I no longer need anything from that past event.

**Forgive for release.** If you find yourself still blocked by unresolved issues, bring in forgiveness. Forgive yourself for the mistakes you think you made and forgive the other person or people.

**Rewrite your story.** Emotional grip can sometimes be measured by how often you repeat the same story. Especially if you have a favourite recitation about something bad that happened, look again and tell the story (even to yourself) in a different way. What if the ending became "and we lived happily ever after"?

**Abundance rather than lack.** If you choose to remember and focus on your life as not good enough, having made bad decisions, and lacking what others have, you will experience a sense of lack. Instead, embrace a personal history of wonder, excitement, learning, and love. Choose prosperity and abundance.