

Is a samskara something you must live with because it is your destiny? Or is it like an old glove that you can avoid putting on? It depends on you. If you make the best use of all the potential you have as a human being, you avoid the effects of your samskaras. But if you are a fatalist, having no confidence in self-effort, then you will remain a victim of your samskaras. Let me explain.

Samskaras are the subtle impressions of our past actions. As long as we are alive, we continuously perform actions, but not all of them contribute to the formation of samskaras. Actions that we perform with full awareness are the ones that make the greatest impression on our mind. In other words, it is the intention behind the action that gives power to that action. This process is beautifully explained by the literal meaning of the word “samskara.” The prefix sam means well planned, well thought out, and kara means “the action under-taken.” Thus, “samskara” means “the impression of, the impact of, the action we perform with full awareness of its goals.” When we perform such an action, a subtle impression is deposited in our mindfield. Each time the action is repeated, the impression becomes stronger. This is how a habit is formed. The stronger the habit, the less mastery we have over our mind when we try to execute an action that is contrary to our habit patterns. We all have seen how our habit patterns subtly yet powerfully motivate our thoughts, speech, and actions.

When our habit patterns become so ingrained that they alter our body chemistry, it is called “addiction.” When they become strong enough to alter our thinking process, it is called “samskara.” At this stage we no longer remember when or how this process started. And without introspection or retentive power we fail to discover the realm of the mind where these samskaras are stored. When our mental world is totally under the influence of these powerful impressions they become the determining factors of our personality, and due to these samskaras we perceive this world in our habitual ways.

The contents of our mind color our perception of ourselves and others. When even our discriminatory faculty, the intellect, is colored and we spontaneously and effortlessly think, speak, and act in accordance with those colored perceptions, then the samskaras have become vasanas (literally, “color” or “coloring agent”). Now we have little choice but to see ourselves and the world in accordance with these potent impressions from our past deeds.

You can clearly see that these samskaras and vasanas are our own creation. If we commit ourselves to inertia and make no effort to discover an alternative, then these subtle impressions of our past deeds will have the force of destiny. To those who lack self-trust and self-confidence, destiny cannot be altered. But if destiny were really unalterable, then why bother to do anything in life? It is only because destiny is alterable that swamis, pandits, gurus, priests, astrologers, and palmists are in business.

Finally, your question seems to be motivated by the belief that all samskaras are negative. This is not true. Good deeds create positive samskaras, bad deeds create negative ones. In the long journey of life, we have performed all kinds of actions—right and wrong, good and bad. Our mind is a warehouse of positive and negative samskaras, and it is up to us whether or not we exercise our willpower and determination to strengthen or eliminate a particular group of them.

Can negative samskaras be eradicated so they don't resurface? Is it advisable to erase them? Yes, negative samskaras can be eradicated, provided you learn to capture those bright and delightful moments when the positive samskaras are in full bloom. Just as with everything else in the world, our positive and negative samskaras and their influence on our life are in constant flux. The tragedy is that when our positive samskaras result in good fortune—health, wealth, and happiness—we become intoxicated and abuse our body, mind, and senses. We forget that someday this wheel of fortune will rotate downward and we will need the strength and stamina to push it

upward again. Unfortunately, we think of altering our destiny only when we are stricken by misfortune.

When we are already stricken by misfortune, is it too late to think of working with our samskaras and vasanas and altering our destiny? It is never too late. We must remember that darkness has no power to swallow light. No matter how small the flame and no matter how dense the darkness around it, it still shines—in fact, due to the contrast, it shines brighter. Similarly, the indomitable will of the soul burns on even during the downward spiral of our destiny. In deep depression we may lose hope, but we never lose faith in life itself. The will to live and the desire to find some meaning in life never dies. And if we follow our undying will we will be able to overcome the influence of our negative samskaras. All we need is patience.

Don't build high expectations of yourself in the beginning stages of your endeavor to erase the negative traits that are influencing your destiny. Instead of trying to penetrate the entire mystery of karma, samskara, vasana, and destiny, simply try to compose yourself. With a calm and tranquil mind, assess your strengths and weaknesses. Then decide whether at this stage you should place greater emphasis on eliminating your negative samskaras or strengthening the positive ones.

Think this way: Three patients come to see a holistic health practitioner. The first is twenty-five years old, is suffering from lack of motivation, and has neither the energy nor the will to take any initiative. He suffers from constipation, his shoulders are tense, his breath shallow, and his diet consists almost entirely of junk food. The second person is in his seventies. He is quite weak, has a poor digestive system, is diabetic, and gets tired from even the smallest exertion. The third person, however, is neither weak nor particularly strong. He is in his forties. His diet is relatively good and he exercises occasionally, but when he does he feels tired. When the doctor sees these three patients, he decides that the first one needs to undergo a detoxification program, for he is suffering from ama (the toxins accumulated in the body). To him a regimen that focuses on cleansing will be appropriate. The second one is put into a rejuvenation program, where the emphasis is on nourishing the body and mind, and the techniques of cleansing are applied only to the extent that his weak body can handle them. In this case, any method of invasive cleansing will harm the patient. In the third case, it is perfectly appropriate to put the patient in a therapy program in which there is a blend of cleansing and nourishment. The patient is strong enough to handle the exertion caused by more intense detoxification techniques and is equally in need of nourishment.

Similarly, in an attempt to cleanse yourself of the negative samskaras, you yourself (or with the assistance of someone more experienced) figure out where you should place your greatest emphasis. Do you want to emphasize eliminating negative samskaras, or do you want to nourish your mind by creating positive samskaras? Or like the third patient, do you want to do both simultaneously? Most of us fall into the third category. That's why spiritual practices are designed to help us eliminate our negative samskaras while we simultaneously replace them with positive ones. For example, traditionally the practice of the gayatri mantra is more for cleansing the mind, while the practice of the maha mritunjaya mantra is more for nourishing the mind. Then there are those practices which engender both effects together in a balanced manner.

As a practical tip, I will advise that no matter which practice you wish to do, whatever your intention, make sure that you perform your duties joyfully and selflessly and share a portion of your fortune with those who are less fortunate than you. This selfless act will automatically attenuate your negative samskaras and infuse your mind with motivation to do something further that is good and auspicious. Once this process begins, the momentum toward self-transformation will continue to increase.