

Stuck in a Rut?

You *can* break free. A yoga teacher and psychologist shares her blueprint for transforming negative habits. By Bo Forbes

As a yoga teacher, I see several archetypes in my classroom, yet none so disquieting as the driven and unconscious student who, with glazed eyes, goes to the extreme or attempts the most advanced variation of every pose. Completely dissociated, he pushes further and further, unable to take in corrections or adjustments. Not until he stresses his body to the point of injury or exhausts his nervous system might he notice the potential harm of this cycle. Meanwhile, the nectar of awareness lies just beyond his reach: Backing off and inhabiting his practice in a more relaxed way could bring greater sensation, awareness, and growth.

As a psychologist, I'm aware that the repetitive behavior students exhibit during yoga class originated long before they stepped onto the mat; the classroom is simply the arena in which we can witness our deeply ingrained habits in all their glory. According to yogic philosophy, we're born with a karmic inheritance of mental and emotional patterns—known as *samskaras*—through which we cycle over and over again during our lives.

The word *samskara* comes from the Sanskrit *sam* (complete or joined together) and *kara* (action, cause, or doing). In addition to being generalized patterns, *samskaras* are individual impressions, ideas, or actions; taken together, our *samskaras* make up our conditioning. Repeating *samskaras* reinforces them, creating a groove that is difficult to resist. *Samskaras* can be positive—imagine the selfless acts of Mother Theresa. They can also be negative, as in the self-lacerating mental patterns that underlie low self-esteem and self-destructive relationships. The negative *samskaras* are what hinder our positive evolution.

Get a Brand-New Groove

The Nasadiya, or Creation Hymn, in the Rig Veda—the oldest sacred text of Hinduism—speaks of an oceanic darkness that covered the life force of creation: “Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning, / with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. / The life force that was covered by emptiness, / that one arose through the power of heat.” This is a metaphor for our spiritual birth: In the beginning, we, like the universe, contain an ocean of unconsciousness dotted by archipelagic areas of awak-

ening; together, they make up our inner world. Then something is sparked, and a process begins. Our goal is to shine awareness on the dark ocean, to bring ourselves into being. To do so, we need to exchange our negative *samskaras* for positive ones.

Samskara is universal; it's one of the elements that define the human condition. We are, undeniably, creatures of habit, and the physical, mental, and emotional places we often gravitate toward are the well-navigated galaxies of negative *samskara*. Yet the Yoga Sutra (II.16) states, “*Heyam dukkham anagatam*,” or “Future suffering is to be avoided.” Sounds simple enough, but how do we do it?

Over the years, I've witnessed countless people caught in the pull of destructive *samskaras* and nearly as many struggling to create healthier patterns. When used in synergy, yoga—which generates insight through the physical body—and psychology—which examines the emotional realm—can be tremendously effective in the battle against negative *samskaras*. From the



interweaving of these two healing philosophies has emerged the guide that follows, with seven steps for transforming samskaras.

STEP ONE

***Sankalpa* (Intention)**

Changing samskaras is not an accidental process, a formula we stumble upon without meaning to. In the struggle to create healthier samskaras, *sankalpa* (intention) is what mythologist Joseph Campbell termed

a "call to awakening." Sankalpa unites our mind with those deeper parts of ourselves that can be so hard to access. Conscious use of sankalpa is a compelling way of communicating what we want to our emotional and spiritual bodies.

At the beginning of my yoga classes, before chanting *Om*, I invite students to call to mind an intention for their practice. The intention can be nonviolence, awareness of the breath, or something more personal. Whatever form the in-

tention takes, setting it consciously before beginning to practice galvanizes our inner resources and aligns them with the energy of change. Sankalpa acts as a guiding *sutra*, or "thread," that we weave throughout our yoga practice, on and off the mat. Yet we still need more steam to take us full-course.

STEP TWO

***Tapas* (Intensity)**

This steam is provided by *tapas* (intensity, perseverance, or heat). Tapas is the intensity that ignites our psychological process and helps sustain the discipline required for change. Falling back on our old habits, however unhealthy they may be, can feel like a comforting release in the short term. But anytime we manage to refrain from repeating a particular samskara, that action retains a concentrated energy inside of us. This energy fans the flame of awareness, bringing our inner wisdom to light. Intensity for its own sake, however, can be a form of negative samskara, so it's important that tapas be tempered with intelligence.

We create tapas in part by committing to the daily "work" of our samskara practice; this type of work can range from doing our physical asana practice every day to waking earlier than usual to meditate, write in a journal, or practice yoga. We also generate tapas through abstinence from negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; this involves maintaining vigilance around our samskaras and refraining from their pull. Continued renewal of our commitment to changing samskaras creates a well of tapas from which we can draw when we need to, and ultimately awakens the true Self.

But once we've married intention with tapas, how do we refrain from repeating the lightning-fast responses that activate old samskaras?

STEP THREE

***Shani* (Slowing)**

Samskaras are instinctual and can be activated in the blink of an eye. But reacting impulsively only strengthens samskaras, making them even more irresistible. In much the same way as top-notch athletes

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watch slow-motion video replays to detect movement patterns and improve performance, *shani* (slowness) can lengthen the interval between impulse and action. This allows for greater reflection, helping us detect whether or not our actions stem from old *samskaras*.

Take Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose), for example. Suppose we are flexible in the shoulders and upper back but stiff in the lower back and hamstrings. Instinctively, we might exploit our flexibility and push the shoulders, upper back, and ribs as far down as possible, keeping the lower back and hamstrings asleep. Slowing down and holding the pose longer can make us aware of this movement pattern. We can then lift the shoulders to awaken the lower back and hamstrings and explore what's happening there.

At first, we may encounter tightness or resistance. This is a blessing, because unpleasant sensations often lead us to rich material. We might learn about our physical patterns of movement, or about memories or emotions locked within our tight places. Imagine what we can gain from bringing this reflective approach to our lives off the mat.

When we slow down, we begin to intuit where change is most authentic and honors our deeper selves. We begin to look inward, to develop insight.

STEP FOUR

Vidya (Awareness)

What trains our sights on the parallel inner worlds of anatomy, psychology, and spirit—where the roots of *samskara* lie—is *vidya* (awareness or seeing clearly). Laser-like, it illuminates these worlds, whether they are made of muscle, fascia, and fluid or of thought, emotion, and impulse. *Vidya* helps us recognize our thoughts, behaviors, and movements as *samskara*. It upgrades our ability to question ourselves intelligently. From “Why is this happening to me?” we evolve to more penetrating questions, such as, “What does this pattern have to tell me?”

However, intellectual insight that does not travel beyond the mind seldom translates into change. Because the body hous-

es our emotional intelligence, it might not assimilate the insight. Yoga acts through the medium of the body, taking *vidya* to even deeper levels. Through yoga, we integrate and experience physically and emotionally what we intellectually know to be true.

Yet even insight isn't enough to break free of old *samskaras*. There's usually a moment when we're ready to change yet find ourselves held captive by an unseen force. What is this unseen force? Why

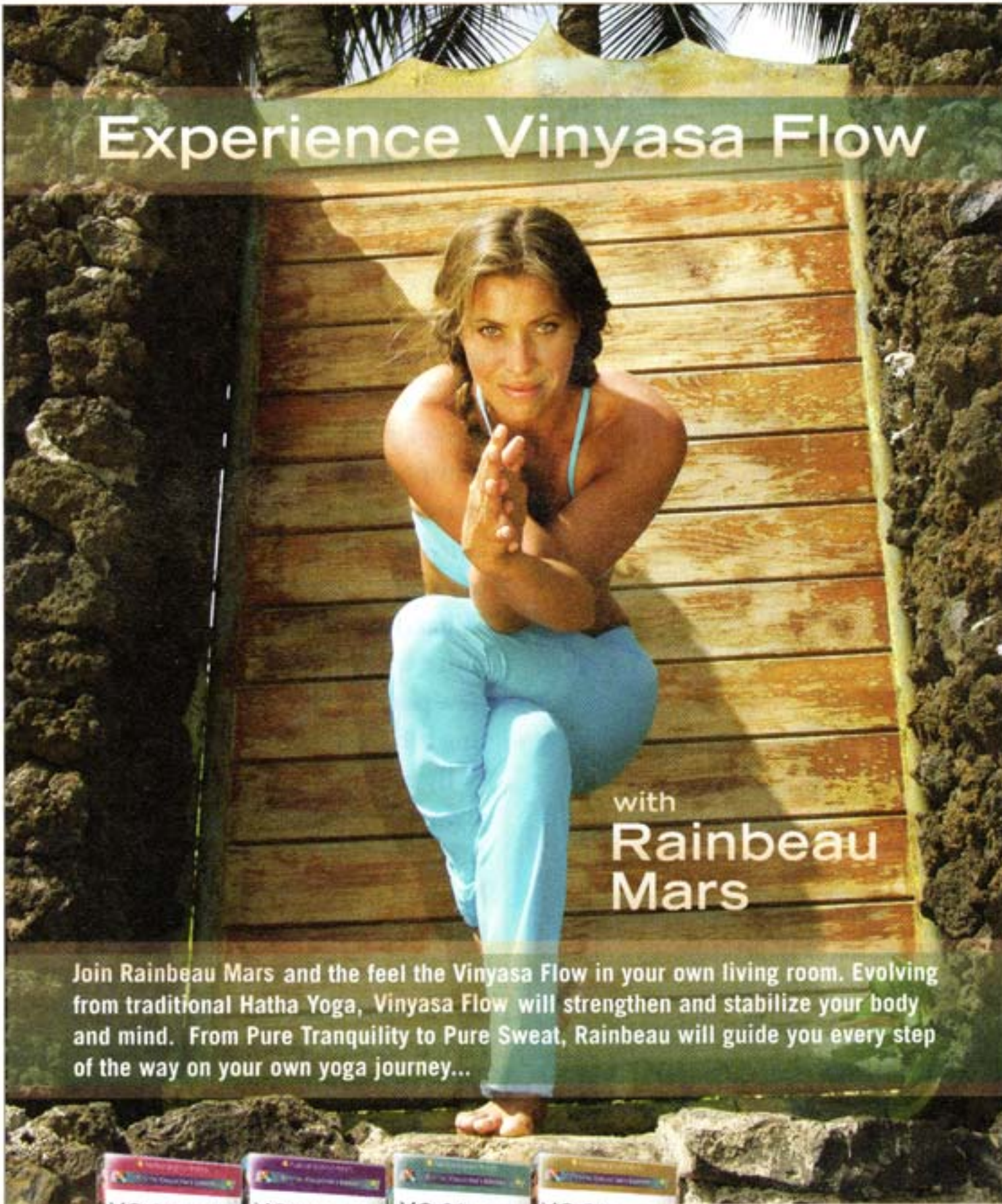
does it paralyze us, so maddeningly, just when we're ready to surge forward?

STEP FIVE

Abhaya (Fearlessness)

Part of the lure of old *samskaras* is the belief that “the devil you know is better than the one you don't.” We tend to prefer the familiar to the unknown.

The alluring nature of *samskara* contributes to this. It is artful, magician-like: It mesmerizes us with endless repetitions




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of a pattern, the polishing of its deep groove, while deftly concealing the fears, needs, and beliefs that lie beneath.

Changing samskara requires *abhaya* (fearlessness). *Abhaya* helps us face the unknown. When we cut off a destructive relationship, for instance, we might worry about finding someone else. Yet without the distraction of the relationship, we face deeper issues, such as the feelings of shame or worthlessness that may have led us into the relationship in the first place. Through *abhaya*, we learn to tolerate unpleasant sensations, like grief, letting them pass without resorting to the comfort of old samskaras.

STEP SIX

Darshana (Vision)

Once we've examined the roots of our patterns, we must finally create a new samskara. To do this, we need to envision what it might look like.

This is where *darshana* (vision) comes into play. When we create a vision for our new pattern, we must give it a life force more vital than the old one. We need to convince ourselves that it is real. We use our senses and emotions to bring it to life: What does it look, smell, or feel like? The more we visualize (and experience) the new pattern, the more real and compelling it becomes.

By making space in the body during yoga, we generate freedom in the mind; this freedom can spark our creativity, helping us find an unlimited choice of healthier patterns.

I often encourage students in *Savasana* (Corpse Pose) to create a memory of freedom and space in previously tight mental, emotional, and physical places. This memory is a blueprint for the freedom and expansive vision that lie at the heart of transforming samskara.

STEP SEVEN

Abhyasa (Practice)

When starting a new pattern, or in times of stress, the lure of old patterns is strongest. *Abhyasa* (practice) helps make our new samskara more powerful than the old; the more we reinforce the new groove, the stronger it becomes. Understanding what

can trigger a relapse and rededicating ourselves to our practice keep us from backsliding. This is a good time to ask, "How can my practice be more reflective? Which of the seven elements do I need to work on? What sends me into a tailspin?"

Like beads on a yoga *mala*, each of the elements of samskaric repatterning builds on the previous one. Together these elements, like the whole *mala*, become an instrument for spiritual practice.

Breaking New Ground

All patterns, even samskaras, represent order. When we leave an old pattern behind, we enter a liminal space—a *bar-do*, to borrow a Tibetan term. Like the space between an exhalation and the next inhalation, this place is ripe with unlimited possibilities for new choices.

This in-between space can be unsettling. During a recent session, a woman poignantly asked, "If I let go of these beliefs, will I still be myself?" We often resist new patterns for fear of losing the identities we've so carefully constructed. And it's true that when we change a long-held pattern, we undergo a rebirth of sorts. This rebirth hints at a new incarnation, a more evolved version of the self. Yet improving our samskara brings us closer to our true nature, which is the goal of yoga.

Samskara is also defined as a perfecting and polishing, a process of cultivation. Shifting samskara, then, is the ongoing work of chipping away at our negative patterns to illuminate the purity of the soul. Like alchemists in our own transformation, we constantly refine and direct our samskara into healthier designs.

The good news is that the ability to shift our patterns—once we've sown the seeds—is self-generating, self-sustaining, and self-renewing. When we're patient enough to facilitate samskara's organic process, to honor its inner sound and slow rhythm, change simply flows. And it's a joy to taste the reward of all this hard work in its natural form, the sweetness that arises from seeing long labor and preparation come to fruition. ■

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