

Why Shame Is a Waste of Time and what to replace it with

A reframe on how bad habits form and persist from a perspective of Indian wisdom (karma and dependent origination) that allows to replace shame with action.

We're taught to feel ashamed about our bad habits. We treat them as moral failures, character flaws and proof that something is fundamentally wrong with us. We feel bad about ourselves as if it was suppose to help us change. It doesn't. How many people do you know who shamed themselves out of a bad habit? probably not many. Shame is terrible motivation.

Why doesn't shame work? First of all, it creates an impossible gap. When you're ashamed, you're standing here as "this bad, lazy person" and you need to get there (far away) to become the "good, unlazy person." How do you cross that distance? How do you transform your entire being just like that? Shame creates a position from which it's very hard to start any change.

Shame also kills your sense of agency. How can you change anything if you really did not want to, but just did this awful thing again? Shame often triggers the exact behavior you're trying to stop—it feels awful, so you reach for comfort.

Finally, shame often becomes a convenient excuse: "I already ate the cake and feel terrible about it, might as well have another." Shame obviously doesn't change what happened, so when looked at logically, it's a waste of time and energy. And yet we keep choosing it.

Choosing it? Shame is an emotion and we do not choose our emotions. Well, might not not choose our emotions, but we do decide on our interpretations, and those trigger the emotions. There's no government or authority telling us that we should feel bad about ourselves for oversleeping. In fact, there are numerous people waking up at the same time and feeling great about it. But if you see yourself as a failure for repeating certain behavior, you will feel ashamed, and this exact shame will make changing this behavior exponentially harder.

The reframe: Karma and Dependent Origination

Karma is an ancient Indian term, now often misunderstood as punishment for bad deeds. The concept itself is very complex, but from a behavioral angle it can be put simply as this: your action (cause) produces consequences (effect), which then shapes your future actions and environment (cause again). Karma, though, is not so much a single action as a habit in the making—each repetition strengthens and reinforces it, exactly as we see in habit formation through neural pathways. You might have heard this quote that captures the idea perfectly: “Sow an act, and you reap a habit; sow a habit, and you reap a character; sow a character, and you reap a destiny.”

From scientific point of view, repetition builds neural pathways because it's essential for survival—efficiently wiring for almost subconscious, fast-executed actions. In practice, oversleeping a few times in a row quickly becomes “a basal state.” We are practicing our bad behaviors meticulously for however many years. Of course we get “good at it”.

Bad habits aren't moral failures. They're just behaviors that started for whatever reason and got strengthened through repetition. It's no more a reason to be ashamed than learning to eat with chopsticks rather than fork and knife. It's simply practiced behavior.

Questions like: “Why, oh why, am I so lazy?” or “What's wrong with me?” completely miss the point and are a waste of time. This habit is the result of years of practice. Of course it's a mastered skill by now. But if a habit can be started, it can be stopped. Stopping a long-term habit is obviously not easy. The longer a pathway is practiced, the more work it takes to build a new one. But the capability is already there. If you built this habit, you can build another one.

But why did you start this habit in the first place?

This is where Dependent Origination idea becomes useful in daily life. Dependent Origination is a Buddhist concept, again a very complex and layered one. A simplified version of it is the idea that nothing happens or exists by itself. Everything is just a result of another cause before, which is also caused by something before it, and so on. There is no single root cause one can identify and fix, only an infinite chain of causes stretching backwards.

Let's say you're trying to understand why you drink. You might start with a simple answer: “I started drinking in 2005 because it was a difficult year.” But that's not really the full answer, is it? If you're honest, you'll say: “I actually drank as a teenager too. I had a difficult childhood, so I learned to cope this way.” But go deeper: “Why did I have those coping patterns? Probably my brain wiring, maybe addictive tendencies, definitely what I observed from my parents.” Keep going: “Why did my parents drink? Their trauma, their upbringing, what was culturally acceptable and available to them.” And their parents? And their parents?

You can trace this chain back through generations, through cultural norms, through historical circumstances, but there is no bottom. No original cause exists that you can point to and say “THIS is why.”

What this means practically is that you can follow this chain, and it’s intellectually interesting. You might even gain some understanding about yourself, your family, your patterns. What you definitely can do with this knowledge is to use it to stop blaming yourself for something that hadn’t begun with you.

But understanding the chain doesn’t change much about moving forward. Understanding the infinite chain of causes doesn’t make you stop drinking. Knowing your great-grandfather had war trauma doesn’t automatically change your behavior.

Stopping drinking requires stopping drinking. Stopping oversleeping requires stopping oversleeping.

The only point in the infinite chain you can actually affect is now. All the causes that led here? Already happened. Nothing can change them. The only thing you can change is what you practice starting today.

The practical difference: Shame tells you: “I AM a bad, lazy person.” What to do about it? There is no clear path forward, only despair. Karma and Dependent Origination, as used here, tell you: “I have a momentum of laziness behind me for whatever reason (infinite chain of causes), so I must create a new momentum through action.” If you’ve been oversleeping for years, now you need to start waking up earlier. Immediate and concrete action is available at any moment, even if it is tiny.

The real-world test: Imagine you decide to start getting up earlier. Day 1: You oversleep. If you choose shame, you’ll have an awful day beating yourself up. Your motivation will drop. The chance you get up early the next day becomes very low. If you use this approach, you can take a different stance. “I practiced oversleeping for years and I cannot pinpoint how it started. Of course one attempt doesn’t fix it. I’ll try again tomorrow.” If one slip does not mean failure, the motivation can stay intact. You can actually try again the next day.

Shame sabotages the exact motivation you need to build new pathways. Understanding Dependent Origination, even in this very simplified form, makes it possible to ditch the shame. Understanding Karma means knowing that change happens through practice, one attempt at a time. Instead of wasting energy regretting what happened, start where you are. And put that energy into taking the next step, however small, towards building new habits.

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