

Alaya

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Alaya is the Universal Soul, the World-Soul, the living basis of consciousness throughout manifestation. H.P. Blavatsky relates it to *Anima Mundi* and the Over-Soul. The term draws attention to a unity deeper than the separate forms through which life appears. For the student, its importance is both cosmic and intimate: it asks how individual awareness can become receptive to a universal life, and how that widening of consciousness can find expression in compassion.

In *The Secret Doctrine*, *Alaya* is described as eternal and changeless in its inner essence, yet subject to alteration with respect to the lower planes during cosmic activity. These statements refer to different aspects. The essential ground is not exhausted by its changing manifestations. The distinction prevents us from imagining the World-Soul as merely an enormous organism subject to the same conditions as our bodies. It also prevents the opposite mistake of making universality so remote that it has no relation to living beings.

Blavatsky acknowledges differing schools and several meanings of the term. Her Theosophical exposition associates *Alaya* both with the Universal Soul and, in the contemplative *Yogacharya* teaching she describes, with the Self of a progressed adept. This is a specific esoteric interpretation, rather than a definition to be imposed upon every Buddhist use of the word. Within it, the relation between universal and individual consciousness becomes a question of realization through meditation, not merely an agreement with a philosophical proposition.

The governing image is reflection. *Alaya* is said to reflect itself in every object of the universe “like the moon in clear tranquil water.” One moon may appear in many pools without being divided among them. The image directs thought towards a common presence expressed through different conditions. When a pool is disturbed, its reflection changes; the moon has not suffered the same disturbance. Similarly, confusion in our perception need not be attributed to the universal reality we imperfectly apprehend.

The Theosophical Glossary relates *Alaya* to *Akasa* in its mystic sense and to *Mulaprakriti* in its essence, as the basis or root of things. These correspondences should be approached through their stated aspects. *Akasa* emphasizes the subtle medium of manifestation; *Mulaprakriti*, primordial root-substance; *Alaya*, universal soul and the ground of sentience. They are not three separate materials placed beside one another. Nor do these names make the Absolute, *Parabrahman*, into an object that can be contained within a definition.

Professor Iyer develops the cyclic dimension in “Spiritual Wakefulness.” The two aspects of *Alaya* correspond to *Maha-Manvantara* and *Maha-Pralaya*, cosmic manifestation and repose. During manifestation it is the vital basis of intelligence distributed through the kingdoms of life. During the great dissolution, the universe's *Alaya* is described as abiding in *Paramartha*, transcendent comprehension and true Being. The contrast concerns manifestation and latency, and invites a conception of life wider than the activity currently visible to our senses.

Difference remains essential within that wider view. Blavatsky says that everything lives and is conscious, while expressly distinguishing these modes from human or animal consciousness. An atom, a tree and a human being do not possess interchangeable capacities. The doctrine concerns a common basis with many degrees of expression. It gives us a reason to study the differences carefully. Reverence for Nature grows more discerning when we attend to what a particular living being needs, instead of projecting our own experience upon it.

For human consciousness, the task is to make this universality inwardly effective. Professor Iyer connects the meditative union of the self-conscious soul with *Alaya* in its eternal aspect to conscious immortality and boundless compassion. Blavatsky calls the condition of merging with *Alaya* one next to nirvana, preserving a distinction between stages. Such statements describe profound attainment. A passing feeling of spaciousness can encourage inquiry, but should not be mistaken for the stable realization to which the teaching points.

The preparation begins more quietly. Professor Iyer speaks of establishing a permanent core of silence. He also suggests attentive contact with the ancient rhythms of the ocean or the sounds of the mountains as an antidote to a hurried, consumption-centred life. The purpose is a deeper conception of vitality. We may begin by allowing attention to rest without immediately turning an experience into a possession, an explanation, or a story about ourselves. Patient observation makes room for something beyond habitual self-concern.

Manas can then be used to examine the assumptions that narrow our world. *Buddhi* signifies the spiritual discernment through which a less separative understanding becomes possible. This does not require abandoning clear thought. Professor Iyer insists that a standpoint beyond temporal particulars can sharpen attention to them. A wider consciousness should make us more alert to the person before us, the promise we made, and the task that needs doing. Timelessness, in his account, carries increased responsibility for time.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means allowing that responsibility to include lives outside our usual sympathies. Consider a disagreement in which each participant sees only their own injury. To widen the circle is to ask what fears, obligations and hopes are present on both sides. Judgment remains necessary, especially where harm must be stopped. But the other

person need not be excluded from human concern. The larger view makes a more adequate response possible because it takes more of the situation into account.

Human Solidarity follows naturally from a teaching of shared spiritual life. *The Key to Theosophy* relates solidarity to universal causation: our actions enter the lives of others. *Alaya* gives this interdependence a metaphysical depth, while daily conduct gives it practical meaning. Fair dealing, patient teaching and dependable help become ways of acknowledging a common life. Their worth does not depend upon being noticed. Even an unobtrusive act can make another person's difficult day more bearable.

Compassion is also the test of contemplative motive. In "Spiritual Wakefulness," Professor Iyer distinguishes the search for universal awareness from the desire to escape a disappointing world. A retreat into inward experience can preserve self-concern in a subtler form. The movement towards *Alaya* should instead deepen the capacity to remain useful. We can ask whether silence has made us more available to others, more truthful about our faults, and less eager to protect our comfort at their expense.

When someone is grieving, universality need not become a lesson we press upon them. It may ask us to listen without hurry, remember a practical need, or remain present when words have reached their limit. A teaching of common life is honoured by taking another person's particular experience seriously.

The Voice of the Silence joins the same two movements. It identifies *Alaya* as the Universal Soul and asks the disciple to live in others as they live in it. Later, its call to become All-Thought stands beside the demand for tenderness towards others' suffering. The universal is approached through an education of the heart as well as the mind. Inward steadiness and compassion must develop together if meditation is to become more than a private refuge.

Return, then, to the moon and the water. We do not create the moon by clearing the pool. We attend to the conditions through which it may be reflected. In human life, those conditions include honesty, attention, restraint and an enlarging sympathy. *Alaya* gives these familiar efforts a far-reaching direction. The soul learns to become less enclosed in its own story, and more capable of reflecting a life already shared with others.

Glossary

Akasa or Akasha — The subtle spiritual medium of manifestation; identified with *Alaya* in its mystic sense.

Alaya — The Universal Soul or World-Soul; also, in the esoteric account discussed here, the Self of a progressed adept.

Anima Mundi — Latin for Soul of the World; a term corresponding to *Alaya*.

Buddhi — Spiritual discernment and intuitive wisdom, through which universal sympathy may illuminate the mind.

Dhyani Buddhas — Spiritual intelligences described as one with *Alaya* in soul and essence.

Maha-Manvantara — A great period of cosmic manifestation or activity.

Maha-Pralaya — A great period of cosmic dissolution and latency.

Manas — The thinking principle; capable of examining the assumptions that sustain separative perception.

Mulaprakriti — Primordial root-substance; identified with *Alaya* in its essence as the basis of things.

Nirvana — Spiritual liberation; the condition of merging with *Alaya* is distinguished from it in the cited *Secret Doctrine* passage.

Over-Soul — A term for the universal spiritual unity in which individual souls participate.

Parabrahman — The Absolute beyond conditioned manifestation and finite definition.

Paramartha — Transcendent comprehension or true Being; a term whose meanings differ with philosophical context.

Prakriti — Nature or substance in its differentiated manifestation.

World-Soul — The universal spiritual basis that animates and informs manifested life.

Yoga — Spiritual discipline; in the cited *Alaya* teaching, mystic meditation.

Yogacharya — The contemplative school named in Blavatsky's exposition; its esoteric *Alaya* teaching is presented in a Theosophical context.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 48.

"Alaya is literally the 'Soul of the World' or Anima Mundi, the 'Over-Soul' of Emerson, and according to esoteric teaching it changes periodically its nature."

Meditation thought: The World-Soul is not a personal possession. Begin by considering the individual within a life more comprehensive than individual experience.

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 48.

“*Alaya*, though eternal and changeless in its inner essence on the planes which are unreachable by either men or Cosmic Gods (*Dhyani Buddhas*), alters during the active life-period with respect to the lower planes, ours included.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish the inner essence from its changing relation to the lower planes. Does a disturbance in the reflection require a disturbance in its source?

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 49.

“Esoteric philosophy teaches that everything lives and is conscious, but not that all life and consciousness are similar to those of human or even animal beings.”

Meditation thought: Shared life includes different capacities and needs. Reverence becomes more useful when it pays close attention to those differences.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, “*Alaya*,” p. 14.

“Identical with *Âkâsa* in its mystic sense, and with *Mulâprâkriti*, in its essence, as it is the basis or root of all things.”

Meditation thought: Attend to the phrases “in its mystic sense” and “in its essence.” Correspondence asks for discernment about the aspect being considered.

5. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, “*Anima Mundi*,” p. 23.

“The ‘Soul of the World’, the same as the *Alaya* of the Northern Buddhists; the divine essence which permeates, animates and informs all, from the smallest atom of matter to man and god.”

Meditation thought: Imagine a concern broad enough to include the smallest life without losing sight of the person nearby. Universal sympathy must find particular expressions.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Spiritual Wakefulness,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 215.

“In its absolute and eternal aspect, *Alaya* precedes the sevenfold differentiation of *Prakriti*, is the unevolved cause of comprehension of all the diverse manifestations of life in the seven kingdoms. During the period of manifestation it is the vital basis of intelligence distributed by degrees throughout the kingdoms of evolved life.”

Meditation thought: The source of intelligence is considered before its differentiation. Let this order of thought temper the habit of treating separate forms as self-sufficient.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Spiritual Wakefulness,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 215.

“The human capacity to merge through meditation the self-conscious soul – *Alaya* in one aspect – with *Alaya* in its eternal aspect is the basis of conscious immortality and boundless compassion.”

Meditation thought: The stated fruit includes boundless compassion. How might compassion help us distinguish a widening of consciousness from an enlargement of self-importance?

8. R.N. Iyer — “Spiritual Wakefulness,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 215.

“In these ways one can approach a deeper and more undifferentiated field of consciousness that is motion at a subtle level of vibration. To do this self-consciously, to establish within oneself a permanent core of silence, is the task of meditation.”

Meditation thought: The preceding examples are attentive listening by the ocean and in the mountains. Consider silence as a growing capacity for perception, rather than mere absence of noise.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Spiritual Wakefulness,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 214.

“Paradoxically, the more one’s consciousness is located beyond the particulars of time, the more attentive one may be to them. Timelessness is neither inertia nor indifference.”

Meditation thought: A wider standpoint can sharpen care for the immediate task. Return to one small obligation with renewed attention.

10. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment III, p. 37.

“So shalt thou be in full accord with all that lives; bear love to men as though they were thy brother-pupils, disciples of one Teacher, the sons of one sweet mother.”

Meditation thought: Meet another person as a fellow learner. What becomes possible when difference is held within a common belonging?

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment III, p. 46.

“Till then, a task far harder still awaits thee: thou hast to feel thyself ALL-THOUGHT, and yet exile all thoughts from out thy Soul.”

Meditation thought: Read this alongside the preceding call for tenderness towards others’ suffering. The discipline is a purification of separative thought, not a rejection of understanding.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Spiritual Wakefulness,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 216.

“Unless and until the divine essence in oneself, which is one with the essence in the heart of every atom, is made the self-conscious basis of boundless compassion towards all beings, the soul cannot realize the permanent potential of universal and eternal life.”

Meditation thought: Let the idea of universal essence become a reason for service. Choose a practical act through which concern may extend beyond the familiar circle.