

The Great Breath

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

The Great Breath is the Theosophical symbol of eternal motion, through which thought approaches the living ground of the cosmos and its rhythmic manifestation. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky uses it for absolute Abstract Motion, representing Unconditioned Consciousness, and for the outbreathing and inbreathing through which universes appear and disappear. Professor Raghavan Iyer develops its human significance through the discipline of attention, the reciprocity of receiving and giving, and spiritual solidarity. The symbol opens a way of understanding change within a wider continuity of life.

Its meaning begins with a distinction between eternal motion and particular movements. In the Proem to *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky speaks of the One Reality under the aspects of abstract Space and abstract Motion. Neither can be pictured adequately as a measurable object or event. Space here exceeds the distances between things; Motion exceeds the movement of one thing past another. The Great Breath is therefore more than a description of activity inside an already existing universe. It is a symbol through which finite intelligence approaches a reality that precedes and sustains every conditioned form.

The occult catechism discussed by Professor Iyer brings this unity into the foreground. It asks what ever is, what ever was, and what is ever coming and going, answering through Space, the Germ in the Root, and the Great Breath. When the pupil asks whether there are three eternals, the answer is that the three are one. The distinctions assist understanding, yet their separation is not ultimate. The symbol of breath belongs within this undivided reality, rather than standing outside it as an independent force.

Blavatsky distinguishes eternal, ceaseless intra-cosmic motion from visible cosmic motion, which is finite and periodical. This preserves the meaning of rest within the doctrine. When a universe is withdrawn, eternal motion has not ceased. What comes to rest is its particular manifested organization. *Manvantara* names a period of manifestation and activity; *pralaya* names its corresponding withdrawal and repose. The imagery of the Days and Nights of *Brahma* gives these alternations a living form. Each period belongs to a succession whose depth cannot be confined to a single beginning or ending.

In another setting, the Great Breath assumes the character of precosmic Ideation, the source of force and individual consciousness. *Mulaprakriti* is considered as precosmic root-substance, underlying the objective planes of Nature. These are aspects of one reality, whose relationship makes manifestation intelligible. In the manifested universe, *Fohat* is described as the dynamic

energy of Cosmic Ideation, linking thought and substance. The terms illuminate related functions. Keeping their settings clear allows us to follow the teaching from its most abstract ground towards differentiated existence without treating every sacred name as an interchangeable label.

Professor Iyer makes the rhythm vivid in “Space and Self-Consciousness.” He speaks of something diastolic and systolic about the cosmos, suggesting a secret cosmic heart with an eternal inward and outward vibration. This image brings the familiar movements of expansion and contraction into contemplation of the whole. Its power depends upon remembering that it is an analogy. The cosmos is not being assigned a physical organ. Rather, the heart invites thought to recognize an ordered pulsation whose meaning includes emergence, sustenance and return.

The same essay cautions against restricting primordial energy to ordinary patterns of activity and rest. Professor Iyer relates the Great Breath to a vivifying power of expansion at the root of manifestation, to *Atman* and to *AUM*. In “Manasadharma,” he calls the *Logos* the Great Breath crystallized into the Word, naming *Oeahoo* as the single, triple and septenary root. Crystallization here suggests articulation: living motion considered in relation to intelligible expression. These connections join breath, sound and consciousness while leaving their metaphysical depth greater than any physical comparison can disclose.

This larger setting changes how human breathing may be considered. In “As Above, So Below,” Professor Iyer begins from *Krishna*’s teaching that receiving and giving can both be sacrificial. Inhalation suggests our continual dependence upon Nature; exhalation suggests participation in a world to which we also contribute. The analogy invites gratitude before it invites any claim of mastery. A meal, a helpful word or knowledge received from a teacher may reveal how much of life arrives through the labour and generosity of others.

Giving then acquires a quieter meaning. We can pass on something useful without making ourselves the centre of the exchange. We can receive help without treating dependence as a humiliation. The movement between these two capacities becomes less cramped when gratitude enters it. In an ordinary conversation, this may mean listening long enough to receive another person’s meaning before offering our own. A modest act of service can give outward expression to something study has awakened inwardly. Such actions make the doctrine available within the responsibilities already before us.

In “Consciousness and Existence,” Professor Iyer asks the student to strengthen spiritual solidarity with the Great Breath and describes this as a reeducation of the whole being. He connects our fragmented awareness with *tanha*, craving, and *ahankara*, the assertion of a separate self. We may recognize their movement when we require circumstances to keep confirming our

importance. A familiar opinion becomes a refuge; an unexpected change feels like an attack. The teaching asks us to examine these identifications patiently, allowing a larger ground of concern to become more real.

The discipline becomes particularly concrete in “The Dawning of Wisdom.” Professor Iyer carries the analogy of breathing into the interval between thoughts and the deliberation that precedes speech. The practical invitation is simple: think before speaking or choosing a course of action. We can let a question become clear before filling the space with an answer. This ordinary pause requires no elaborate breathing exercise. It gives *Manas*, the thinking principle, room to become responsive to *Buddhi*, spiritual discernment. A considered response may then carry firmness without the extra injury of irritation.

Rhythm also offers a way of meeting transience. An endeavour has seasons of preparation, expression and completion; a friendship changes as its participants grow. Remembering periodicity can help us care for what is present without demanding that its form remain fixed. This is an ethical application of the cosmic image, rather than a claim that every disappointment reveals a decipherable cosmic schedule. Sorrow still calls for tenderness, and practical problems still call for action. A wider view can support those responses by loosening the insistence that life conform to our preferred pattern.

At the summit of the path, “Self-Magnetization” describes illumined Bodhisattvas in effortless attunement to the Great Breath, the Soundless Sound. Their eternal motion is called motionless in comparison with motion recognizable on external planes. The apparent paradox asks the mind to distinguish levels of reality. Professor Iyer places this freedom at the summit of enlightenment, within a long discipline of self-regeneration. For the student, its value lies in the direction it gives to aspiration and in the quality of daily preparation it asks us to undertake.

That preparation returns us to human solidarity. If all beings participate in one life, another person’s growth and difficulty belong within our concern. Professor Iyer joins discernment to gentle service in the familiar events of a day. We need not wait for an extraordinary experience to practise this. We can bring fuller attention to a shared task, offer knowledge without possessiveness, and make room for another person’s contribution. The Great Breath then remains an inexhaustible symbol while acquiring a quiet human expression: a life more willing to receive, more thoughtful in its action, and more generous in what it returns.

Glossary

Absolute — The unconditioned One Reality, beyond finite attributes and relations; symbolically approached through such terms as abstract Space and Motion.

Abstract Motion — Motion considered beyond particular moving objects; the aspect of the One Reality symbolizing Unconditioned Consciousness.

Ahankara — The principle of I-making; in the psychological discussion, identification with a separate personal self.

Atman — Universal Spirit; the spiritual principle with whose perpetual motion Professor Iyer connects the Great Breath.

AUM — The sacred syllable associated with the unity of life and consciousness and with the contemplation of primordial motion and sound.

Bodhisattva — A being devoted to enlightenment and the welfare of all; in the cited passage, an illumined being at the summit of spiritual development.

Brahma — The creative deity whose Days and Nights symbolize periods of cosmic manifestation and repose; written *Brahmā* in the quotation.

Buddhi — Spiritual discernment or intuition, through which thought may become responsive to a wider unity.

Cosmic Ideation — Universal thought or intelligence considered as a formative principle in manifestation; precosmic Ideation names its underlying source.

Diastolic and systolic — Terms associated with the relaxation and contraction of the heart; used analogically for cosmic expansion and contraction.

Duration — Endless continuity, distinguished from the measured succession of events through which ordinary consciousness experiences time.

Fohat — The dynamic energy of Cosmic Ideation, linking thought and substance in manifestation; Professor Iyer also discusses its precosmic significance.

Fons et origo — Latin for source and origin; used by Blavatsky of precosmic Ideation in relation to force and individual consciousness.

Kosmos — A spelling used in the sources for the universe as an ordered whole; its precise metaphysical sense depends upon context.

Life-atoms — The sentient units of life composing the vehicles or vestures through which consciousness acts.

Logos — The divine Word or ordering intelligence; related by Professor Iyer to the Great Breath crystallized into expression.

Manas — The thinking principle, capable of personal identification and of becoming responsive to spiritual discernment.

Manvantara — A period of manifestation, activity and evolution, alternating with a corresponding period of repose.

Mulaprakriti — Precosmic root-substance, the aspect of the Absolute underlying the objective planes of Nature.

Oeaoahoo — A sacred designation associated with the unity and root of cosmic manifestation; written *OEAOHOO* in Professor Iyer's quotation.

Periodicity — The law of recurring phases of activity and repose, emergence and withdrawal, throughout manifested existence.

Pralaya — A period of withdrawal, dissolution or repose; its scale is determined by the cycle under discussion.

Soundless Sound — A contemplative designation for primordial spiritual vibration beyond ordinary audible sound; associated with the Great Breath.

Space — In its highest metaphysical use, boundless abstract Space, an aspect under which finite thought approaches the One Reality.

Tanha — Craving or thirst for conditioned existence; a source of attachment and fragmented awareness in the cited discussion.

Vestures — The bodies or vehicles through which consciousness functions on different planes of existence.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 43.

"The appearance and disappearance of the Universe are pictured as an outbreathing and inbreathing of 'the Great Breath,' which is eternal, and which, being Motion, is one of the three aspects of the Absolute—Abstract Space and Duration being the other two. When the 'Great Breath' is projected, it is called the Divine Breath, and is regarded as the breathing of the Unknowable Deity—the One Existence—which breathes out a thought, as it were, which becomes the *Kosmos*. (See *Isis Unveiled*.) So also is it when the Divine Breath is inspired again the Universe disappears into the bosom of 'the Great Mother,' who then sleeps 'wrapped in her invisible robes.'"

Meditation thought: Contemplate emergence and return as phases within a larger continuity. What changes in our care for a passing form when we cease to demand that it contain the whole of life?

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 14.

“This ‘Be-ness’ is symbolised in *the Secret Doctrine* under two aspects. On the one hand, absolute abstract Space, representing bare subjectivity, the one thing which no human mind can either exclude from any conception, or conceive of by itself. On the other, absolute Abstract Motion representing Unconditioned Consciousness. Even our Western thinkers have shown that Consciousness is inconceivable to us apart from change, and motion best symbolises change, its essential characteristic. This latter aspect of the one Reality, is also symbolised by the term ‘The Great Breath,’ a symbol sufficiently graphic to need no further elucidation.”

Meditation thought: Let the distinction between abstract Motion and particular movements open the inquiry. Notice the mind’s wish to turn a symbol of the boundless into something it can picture and possess.

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 15.

“Considering this metaphysical triad as the Root from which proceeds all manifestation, the great Breath assumes the character of precosmic Ideation. It is the *fons et origo* of force and of all individual consciousness, and supplies the guiding intelligence in the vast scheme of cosmic Evolution. On the other hand, precosmic root-substance (*Mulaprakriti*) is that aspect of the Absolute which underlies all the objective planes of Nature.”

Meditation thought: Hold intelligence and substance together in thought. Consider how the visible form of a helpful action gives expression to an intention that cannot be measured by the form alone.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Space and Self-Consciousness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 69.

“There seems to be something diastolic and systolic about the cosmos itself. One cannot even imagine blank space without a kind of pulsation. There is a kind of secret cosmic heart where there is an eternal inward and outward vibration, a ceaseless inbreathing and outbreathing of the Great Breath.”

Meditation thought: Allow the image of the cosmic heart to widen attention. Attend to an ordinary rhythm of Nature while remembering that the analogy invites a meaning beyond its physical example.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Space and Self-Consciousness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 70.

“Even in darkness, even in inexhaustible Space abstracted away from all possible worlds, there is an everlasting energy. To call it energy, however, is not to limit it in terms of ordinary notions of energy which depend upon specific connected patterns of activity and rest. Rather, it suggests an elusive field, in which conceptions of polarity do not apply. The occult notion of *Fohat*, particularly in its pre-cosmic existence, is thus generally inaccessible to even highly abstract field theories. Rather, one must think in terms of a sense of rhythm or alternation, which may be symbolized in terms of a breathing in and breathing out. This vibrationality transcends all our concepts of matter, mind, existence, activity and withdrawal. The phrase ‘Great Breath’ is used because the original Sanskrit etymology of the word ‘breath’ implies the primal vivifying power of expansion at the root of manifestation.”

Meditation thought: Return to the source’s warning about our usual concepts of energy. Let patient study preserve the depth of the symbol where an immediate explanation would make it smaller.

6. R.N. Iyer — “The Gupta Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 10.

“The emanation of matter and spirit into the objective plane of existence is but half the cycle. Its return brings all beings and forms to the bosom of absolute darkness. The period of manifestation covering trillions of years is called a *manvantara* and the corresponding period of rest, called *pralaya*, lasts for an equal duration. They are the Days and Nights of *Brahmā*, which were reckoned with meticulous precision by the ancient Aryans. The whole span of the *manvantara* is governed by the law of periodicity which regulates rates of activity on all planes of being. This is sometimes spoken of as ‘the Great Breath’ which preserves the cosmos.”

Meditation thought: Reflect on activity and repose as belonging to one cycle. What deserves wholehearted care now, and what may be allowed to reach its natural completion?

7. R.N. Iyer — “Consciousness and Existence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 42.

“Instead of placing one’s reliance upon ultimately ephemeral forms, no matter how abstract, one should awaken and strengthen a sense of spiritual solidarity with the Great Breath. To begin to become attuned to the Great Breath in consciousness means reeducating all aspects of one’s being. This demands much time and hard work owing to the vast numbers of miseducated life-atoms in one’s vestures. Through *tanha* and *ahankara*, masses of these miseducated elementals conjoined with brain electricity have left astral grooves, memories of mortality and insufficiency, of limitation and finitude. Because of this fragmentation and discontinuity of consciousness, one constantly tends to look outside oneself for that upon which one may rely.”

Meditation thought: Notice one familiar source of self-importance or insecurity. Meet it without harshness, then ask what a wider sense of solidarity would make possible in the present situation.

8. R.N. Iyer — “As Above, So Below”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 178.

“*Krishna* teaches in the *Gita* that both receiving and giving may be seen as sacrificial. If the idea of sacrifice is linked up to what is inhaled, which is a form of receiving from outside, then it is clear that one is continually benefiting from the sacrifice of Nature. Exhalation is also a mode of sacrifice because every time one breathes one is giving to the world.”

Meditation thought: Recall something received today through another’s work or kindness. Let gratitude find a practical continuation in something useful that you can give.

9. R.N. Iyer — “The Dawning of Wisdom”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 57.

“This means that when a thought is going out and before a thought rushes in, one must pause. This is a most precise and radical mode of ‘deliberation’. It may be put in the form of a simple injunction: Think before you speak. If one really thinks before speaking, if one thinks before choosing a line of action, it will certainly steady the mental breathing and thereby steady the mind. This is truly helpful to others because, as one gains a measure of serenity or stillness, one can become a source of benediction to those who come into one’s sphere of influence.”

Meditation thought: Before a difficult reply, allow the question to become clear. Consider which words would help understanding, and which would merely discharge impatience.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Manasadharma”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 361.

“The *Logos* is itself the seven-vowelled sign, the Great Breath crystallized into the WORD. It is *OEAHOHO*, the Father-Mother of the gods, the single, triple and septenary root from which all proceeds. To credit man as the living septenary symbol of the *Logos* is to become ready to use the reverberation of *OEAHOHO*, meditating upon it, becoming one with it and understanding its threefold pronunciations.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate the relation between living motion and intelligible expression. Let the study of the Word deepen responsibility for the words entrusted to your own speech.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Self-Magnetization”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 182.

“It is a supreme state of freedom which is accessible only at the summit of enlightenment, attained by those Bodhisattvas who have become illumined beings in the fullest sense, capable of mastering all the vestures of incarnation and remaining in effortless attunement to the Great Breath, the Soundless Sound. Acting in time but abiding outside time, moving in space yet resting beyond all visible space, they remain in an Atmic state of eternal motion which is motionless in comparison with all modes of motion recognizable on the external planes of matter.”

Meditation thought: Receive this description as a far-reaching aim of spiritual discipline. Let it encourage patient preparation, with humility about the distance between a passing calm and the attainment described.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Self-Magnetization”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 182.

“This will help in time to attain an assured sense of what is essential in every momentary experience, of the hidden core meaning in a humdrum day of familiar events and responses. There is that which is truly valuable in every context of human interaction, but the discerning soul can only learn from each day by rendering gentle service to all that lives. Within a limited sphere of duty – on a single day for a particular period of time while meeting other beings – one must pierce the veil of unconscious collective processes, which otherwise leave one a victim, more acted upon than acting, mentally passive rather than spiritually awake.”

Meditation thought: Choose one encounter from the day and consider what was truly valuable in it. Carry that recognition into a small act of gentle service.