

Abhyasa

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Abhyasa means sustained practice, assiduous practice, or the continuous effort to abide in a steady state. In Professor Iyer's treatment, it is not mere repetition, habit or anxious effort to produce spiritual attainment. It is repeated wakefulness: the conscious return, again and again, to that which is true. Professor Iyer, following Patanjali, places *Abhyasa* beside *Vairagya*. Deliverance comes through *Abhyasa*, assiduous practice, and *Vairagya*, dispassionate detachment. Practice without detachment becomes strain, ambition or spiritual vanity. Detachment without practice becomes vague and untested. Together they mirror within the world of change that which is changeless beyond it.

Abhyasa is the active opposite of passive sleep. The mere cessation of mental disturbance, such as occurs in sleep or dull withdrawal, cannot liberate consciousness. One may be quiet because one is unconscious, exhausted or numb. *Abhyasa* is wakeful quiet. It is the effort to stand inwardly awake in the midst of *Maya* without being swept away by every modification of mind.

Professor Iyer gives the decisive formula: *Abhyasa* is not just striving to do something; it is the effort to be something. It is the continuous effort to abide in a steady state. The lower mind wants practices it can count and display. *Abhyasa* asks a deeper question: what quality of being is being strengthened? Is consciousness becoming steadier, cleaner, more truthful and more available to *Buddhi*? Professor Iyer explains the *Yogabhashya*'s account of *abhyasa* through *prashantavahita*, a continuity of consciousness that is fully awake and free from fluctuation. This is an ideal of disciplined steadiness. The beginner encounters aspiration followed by reaction, insight followed by forgetfulness, kindness followed by irritation. Practice supplies a way of returning. Over time, one learns what interrupts attention and how a worthy direction can be maintained more consistently.

This returning is not grim. *Abhyasa* becomes richer, more refined and more relaxed through repeated effort, moral earnestness and joyous devotion. It is serious, but not joyless; persistent, but not brittle. It is like tending a flame: attentive, faithful and gentle enough not to disturb the light.

Abhyasa is fruitful when oriented toward *Ekatattva*, the one principle. Mental distractions may be eliminated through constant practice of a single truth or principle. In *Sankhya*, this is *Purusha*, pure Spirit. In ethical life, it may be the good of all. The point is that attention must stop scattering itself among competing fascinations. To practise one truth is to purify attention. Professor Iyer speaks of freeing the mind from old patterns fostered by feeble and fickle

attention. Much suffering arises not from the absence of spiritual ideas, but from the inability to hold a true idea long enough for it to transform conduct. *Abhyasa* is the compassionate retraining of attention.

In daily life, one may choose a single thought and hold it as a vibration in mind and heart for a day or a week: truthfulness in speech, patience before reaction, remembrance of the Self, friendliness toward all beings, or service without self-display. The practice will be forgotten. The work is to return without self-disgust. Every return strengthens the thread. This is one of the most compassionate aspects of *Abhyasa*: it assumes forgetfulness and teaches renewed contact without theatrical despair.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception can itself become a chosen practice. Before judging a situation, pause to include the people whose needs are easiest to overlook. The exercise may begin in one conversation and gradually extend to decisions about work, money and shared responsibilities. Its repetition becomes meaningful when the larger view changes an action. We listen a little longer, make a fairer arrangement or acknowledge a contribution. A principle held steadily in thought begins to acquire a dependable place in conduct.

This gives *Abhyasa* a profoundly humane meaning. One must learn to say, "I do not know," and then practise it until the false image of knowledge breaks. A soul seeking truth must become willing to learn. To say, "I do not know, but I wish to know," is the beginning of psychological health and spiritual receptivity. A modest form of practice might be to review one conversation each evening. Recall where attention was present and where it was lost. Choose a single point to improve the next day, perhaps allowing the other person to finish speaking. The exercise is illustrative; its value depends upon sincere observation and application. It should not become a nightly prosecution of the personality. The aim is to learn enough to return more freely, with a clearer intention and a little more skill.

In "Aquarian Therapy," Professor Iyer turns attention towards the good of others and away from anxious preoccupation with one's spiritual future. The practice has a practical test: can a chosen thought remain alive through a week of changing circumstances? Forgetfulness will occur. Each honest return gives the student another opportunity to renew the intention and understand what drew attention away. The discipline becomes more fruitful as it is joined to self-respect, patience and a willingness to learn.

Thus *Abhyasa* supports Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood. Practice undertaken merely to perfect the personal self remains too small. True *Abhyasa* universalizes motive. It includes friendliness toward all beings, compassion for every creature, inward gladness and cool detachment toward pleasure and pain. These are ways of purifying consciousness for the sake of the whole.

H.P. Blavatsky's *The Voice of the Silence* gives a beautiful form of *Abhyasa* as teaching for the daily use of *Lanoo*. Sacred doctrine is not meant merely to be admired. It must be used, tested, remembered, forgotten and remembered again. A *lanoo* learns to make instruction living and relevant in calm self-control, self-knowledge and compassionate action.

Practice also requires adaptation. A duty, illness or change of circumstance may interrupt a familiar rhythm. The form can be adjusted while the purpose remains: a shorter period of reflection, a quiet recollection during necessary work, or a more manageable commitment. Faithfulness is measured by the quality of renewed attention, not by an inflexible appearance of consistency. This distinction keeps discipline serviceable to life. It allows a human being to continue through different seasons without turning the method into an additional source of hostility towards oneself.

Abhyasa is stewardship of consciousness. Attention is an entrusted field. Speech is an entrusted power. Time is an entrusted rhythm. Relationship is an entrusted opportunity. Even a small practice, faithfully renewed, changes the atmosphere of the mind. It also changes the shared field, because a less reactive word, a steadier breath, a more patient listening, and a renewed thought of the good of all quietly help the world immediately around the practitioner. The fruits are often easiest to notice in relationship. Someone discovers that you interrupt less, respond more calmly or follow through more reliably. These are modest signs, yet they matter. Practice has moved beyond the private period set aside for it and entered the shared day. Its continuity then serves a wider purpose: making the world immediately around the practitioner a little easier to inhabit.

Abhyasa helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. Lower *Manas* is fickle and coloured by desire; higher *Manas* reflects *Buddhi* when the mind can hold truth without appropriating it. Practice steadies the bridge. Its living image is a single lamp kept lit through the winds of distraction, tended daily until the whole room of consciousness is quietly illumined for the benefit of all beings. When the flame steadies, it does not illumine the practitioner alone; it gives light to the room, and the room is shared.

Glossary

Abhyasa — Sustained practice; the repeated effort to establish wakeful steadiness in consciousness.

Buddhi — Spiritual intelligence or intuition; the vehicle of *Atman*.

Dhyana — Meditation; sustained concentrated attention, deepening towards spiritual absorption.

Ekatattva — One principle or truth; a unified focus for the discipline of attention.

Karma — The law of action and consequence, linking individual and collective experience.

Kleshas — Afflictions rooted in ignorance: egoism, attachment, aversion and clinging to phenomenal existence.

Lanoo — A pupil or disciple; one undertaking the daily discipline of spiritual learning.

Manas — The human principle of self-conscious thought, capable of reflecting spiritual intelligence.

Maya — The illusion of treating changing appearances as ultimate reality.

Prashantavahita — A continuous current of tranquil, wakeful consciousness.

Purusha — The spiritual Seer, distinguished from *Prakriti* and its changing forms.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption, proceeding through progressively subtler stages.

Sankhya — An Indian philosophy distinguishing conscious *Purusha* from *Prakriti* and its evolutes.

Universal Brotherhood — The spiritual kinship of humanity and all life, expressed through mutual responsibility.

Vairagya / Viraga — Wakeful detachment from clinging, enabling clear perception and responsible action.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 271.

“Patanjali taught that deliverance can only come through *abhyasa*, assiduous practice, and *vairagya*, dispassionate detachment. *Abhyasa* is the active opposite of passive sleep, and *vairagya* frees one from all attachments, including the *kleshas*, which induce misconceptions. Together, these two mirror in the world of change that which is changeless beyond it.”

Meditation thought: Hold practice and detachment together. Begin again without demanding a particular experience.

2. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 272.

“For Patanjali, however, *abhyasa* is not just striving to do something; it is rather the effort to be something. ‘*Abhyasa* is the continuous effort to abide in a steady state.’ According to the *Yogabhashya*, *abhyasa* is the attempt to preserve *prashantavahita*, continuity of mind or consciousness which is both fully awake and without fluctuations.”

Meditation thought: Ask what quality of being the practice is strengthening. Give steadiness more weight than the count of repetitions.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 272.

“Like all such spiritual exercises, *abhyasa* becomes richer, more refined and more relaxed with persistence that comes from repeated effort, moral earnestness and joyous devotion. *Abhyasa* is the constant criterion for all effort, and the indispensable tool, whenever and however taken up.”

Meditation thought: Let persistence become more relaxed and attentive. Joyous devotion can sustain what pressure alone cannot.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 272.

“Rather, concentration (*samadhi*) proceeds by degrees for one who persists in the effort, because one progressively overcomes everything that hinders it.”

Meditation thought: Respect gradual development. Notice a small hindrance you can work with today.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 275.

“Overcoming mental obstructions through *abhyasa* in respect to one principle requires the progressive purification of the mind, freeing it from the froth and dross of old patterns fostered by feeble and fickle attention.”

Meditation thought: Choose a clear principle and return to it. Learn which distractions repeatedly claim your attention.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 275.

“Most seekers typically find easiest and most effective a concerted effort to expand the feeling of friendliness towards all beings, compassion for every creature, inward gladness and a cool detachment in regard to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice.”

Meditation thought: Let the practice widen friendliness. Include someone towards whom your usual response is impatient or guarded.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 275.

“They can, however, be most effectively eliminated through *abhyasa*, or constant practice of a single truth or principle.”

Meditation thought: The passage concerns obstacles to concentration. Choose one worthy thought and give it steady attention.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Aquarian Therapy”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 56.

“Those who sense the significance of being on the threshold of a New Age will cherish the practice of meditation, of self-study, of listening, learning, and preparing themselves cheerfully and ceaselessly. They must be willing to test themselves, out of self-respect, by prescribing their own daily discipline to follow for a week.”

Meditation thought: Set a modest discipline for a week. Let it be precise enough to practise and humane enough to sustain.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Aquarian Therapy”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 56.

“But they have to keep trying, week by week, testing themselves.”

Meditation thought: Let an interruption become a return. Honest renewal is part of the work.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Aquarian Therapy”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 56.

“Can I take one thought and can I maintain it as a vibration in my mind and heart for a week? This is a strain. It will not be immediately possible.”

Meditation thought: Carry a single idea into changing circumstances. Notice where remembering becomes difficult, without turning the discovery into blame.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Choosing the Tao”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 125.

“He cannot do this all at once, but must, as Krishna teaches, adopt the strategy of recurrent exercise (*abhyasa*) in a spirit of disinterestedness (*vairagya*).”

Meditation thought: Release the demand to complete the journey immediately. Attend faithfully to the next practicable step.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Karma and Transmutation”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 369.

“Continuity of consciousness is the result of continuity of striving rooted in knowledge of the laws of Karma.”

Meditation thought: Think of today’s effort as one contribution to a longer continuity. Let care become a dependable habit.