

Ahankara

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Ahankara means “I-making,” the formation of a sense of self-reference. It is the activity by which consciousness says “I” in relation to experience and gathers a world around that center. In ordinary life, the center becomes associated with a name, body, role, and remembered history. Yet Professor Iyer’s treatment in *The Gupta Vidya* gives the term a wider range. *Ahankara* is not simply a synonym for vanity. Understanding it requires distinguishing the capacity for self-conscious focus from the possessiveness with which that focus can be used.

A sense of personal identity helps organize practical life. We remember an obligation, recognize our part in a mistake, and continue an effort begun yesterday. Difficulty arises when the temporary organization is treated as the whole of the Self. A particular role becomes indispensable to our sense of existence; a criticism of our work feels like a threat to everything we are. The inquiry into *ahankara* asks how identification is being formed and what happens when we hold it more lightly.

“Consciousness and Existence” places the term within cosmic manifestation as well as human psychology. Professor Iyer distinguishes lower forms of *ahankara*, associated with name and form, from a universal self-consciousness related to *Mahat*, Universal Mind. The different levels should not be collapsed. The ordinary personality cannot simply declare its desires universal. The wider meaning gives a context for the personal faculty and points toward its transformation. Self-consciousness can acquire a more inclusive orientation instead of remaining enclosed by the particular forms through which it presently operates.

This helps explain Professor Iyer’s distinction between egoism and egotism in “Cognition, Breath and Speech.” Egoism there means the pure sense of “I-am-I,” connected with individuation. Egotism concerns self-centered appropriation. The technical use of egoism differs from its common meaning in English, so the context matters. The object of inquiry is the relation between awareness and its identifications. We need not condemn the capacity to say “I” in order to question the claims gathered around the name and story that ordinarily follow it.

H.P. Blavatsky uses the variant spelling *Ahamkara* in *The Key to Theosophy*. She relates it to the conception of “I” and discusses *Manas* as the thinking individuality. *Manas* becomes the Spiritual Ego through union with the higher principles. The spelling difference does not introduce an unrelated faculty. It does, however, remind us to attend to the author’s particular use. Ego, individuality, personality, and self-consciousness are closely connected terms whose distinctions are needed if the teaching is to remain useful in practice.

The governing image may be a nameplate at a shared table. A nameplate helps locate a person and assign responsibility; it cannot contain the person's whole being. We can use it without believing that every event at the table must affirm the importance of the name it carries. In much the same way, personal identity can serve a useful function. *Ahankara* becomes restrictive when the necessary point of reference turns into an exclusive claim upon recognition, possession, and control.

Imagine helping to organize a community project. At its conclusion, a public account mentions the visible work but overlooks a contribution we made. Disappointment may be understandable. The difficulty begins when that omission becomes the measure of the entire undertaking. We stop seeing what was accomplished and notice only the missing acknowledgment. Self-study can ask whether a factual correction is needed, whether a conversation would help, and how much of the reaction comes from the demand that the project confirm a preferred image of ourselves.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception brings the other contributors and the people served back into view. It does not require pretending that credit never matters. Fair acknowledgment can be part of justice. The wider view helps distinguish that concern from the wish to possess a shared achievement. Human Solidarity becomes practical when we can recognize the contributions of others while speaking honestly about our own. The project remains larger than the nameplate, and our participation need not be diminished by that fact.

Professor Iyer's "Gestation and Growth" gives the lower sense of self a constructive place. The personal focus can provide a field in which Manasic self-consciousness gains proficiency in moral responsibility. This is a demanding alternative to either indulgence or self-erasure. The personality must be made serviceable. We can take responsibility for an action without turning responsibility into a claim of spiritual importance. We can also acknowledge a limitation without treating it as a complete and permanent account of the person who has discovered it.

Speech reveals much about this process. In "The Logos and Man," Professor Iyer connects the defensive personality with a pressure to manifest through habitual thought and speech. We may explain before understanding, interrupt before hearing, or add a detail mainly to secure a place in the exchange. Reticence offers room for observation. It need not mean artificial silence or fear of expression. It can mean allowing a thought to mature enough that its purpose becomes clearer before it is spoken.

The subtlety of the problem appears in "The Diamond Sutra." Professor Iyer observes that the effort to overcome egotism can produce new forms of it. We may become attached to the image of being detached, or seek recognition for our refusal to seek recognition. Seeing this possibility should make practice more candid. A discovery of self-importance is material for further

understanding. Turning it into an occasion for elaborate self-reproach would merely give the personal story another way to occupy the center.

Meditation upon the sense of “I,” called *aham* meditation in “Cognition, Breath and Speech,” explores awareness apart from its attachment to particular objects and concerns. This is an inward discipline, not a demand to abolish the person. Professor Iyer explicitly questions an obsessive effort to extinguish the sense of self. The direction is toward a less confined consciousness. In daily practice, the inquiry can begin by noticing how quickly a passing state becomes an identity and allowing that identification to be examined.

“Continuity of Consciousness” adds a related concern about holding on to the residues of the past. A remembered role can remain influential long after its circumstances have changed. We may continue defending an old account of ourselves because its familiarity feels secure. Reconsidering that account does not erase what happened. It allows the present situation to make a fresh claim upon our attention. Growth requires enough continuity to learn from experience and enough freedom to stop repeating an identity that no longer serves understanding.

The doctrine therefore joins self-consciousness with responsibility rather than with a campaign against personal existence. A clearer sense of self can admit error, make commitments, and release an unnecessary claim. It can recognize that another person’s different experience does not automatically threaten its own. This gives thought room to turn toward *Buddhi*, the spiritual discernment that places a particular life within a more inclusive whole. The center of attention becomes less possessive as the field of care becomes more extensive.

The nameplate can remain at the table. We still have work to do and a part for which we are answerable. But it need not determine the limits of what we can recognize as valuable. An achievement can be shared, a correction received, and another person’s contribution welcomed. *Ahankara* becomes a subject of liberating study when the familiar “I” learns to ask what its claim is serving. That question can return us, quietly and repeatedly, to a fuller participation in life.

Glossary

Aham — I; the sense of self-consciousness explored in the *aham* meditation described by Professor Iyer.

Ahankara — I-making or the formation of self-reference; also spelled *Ahamkara*. Professor Iyer distinguishes personal identification from higher or universal self-consciousness.

Astral — Pertaining to the subtle form or field associated in Theosophy with embodied life and psychic impressions.

Atavistic — Inherited or recurrent from an earlier condition; the quotation applies the word to established habits of thought and speech.

Atma-Buddhi — *Atman* together with *Buddhi* as its spiritual vehicle; also called the spiritual Monad. Atma-Buddhic is the related adjective.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman*; associated with intuitive discernment. Buddhic means pertaining to *Buddhi*.

Continuity of consciousness — Sustained awareness through changing states and circumstances; spiritually, the enduring continuity of the higher individuality.

Differentiation — The emergence of distinct forms, functions, or conditions within manifestation.

Ego — A center of self-consciousness; the sources distinguish the higher or spiritual Ego from the temporary personal Ego.

Egoism — In Professor Iyer's technical use here, the pure I-am-I consciousness related to individuation; distinct from egotism and from the common English sense of selfishness.

Egoity — The sense or principle of self-conscious I-ness; its meaning depends on whether personal or higher consciousness is being discussed.

Egotism — Self-centered appropriation or assertion. Some older quoted usage qualifies the term to refer instead to higher spiritual self-consciousness.

Elementals — The elemental lives or forces described in Theosophy as participating in nature and the human vehicles; the quotation relates them to habitual psychic impressions.

Fourth Round — The present major evolutionary cycle in the Theosophical sevenfold account; the quoted passage associates its dominant principle with *kama*.

Gupta Vidya — Hidden or secret wisdom; Professor Iyer's designation for an integrated philosophy of spiritual knowledge and human perfectibility.

Human Solidarity — Shared human dignity and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility for others.

Ideation — The activity or formative power of thought; in the sources, also the spiritual patterns underlying manifestation.

Individuality — The enduring thinking Ego in Theosophical usage, distinguished from the personality of a particular life.

Individuation — The emergence or focus of self-conscious individuality; not identical with selfish separation.

Kama — Desire or passion in the human constitution; in cosmic symbolism, also an impulse toward creation or universal good. Kamic means pertaining to *kama*.

Linga Sharira — The astral model-body or subtle vehicle associated with physical embodiment; also written *linga sarira*.

Logos — The spiritual principle of divine ideation and manifestation; the sources distinguish its unmanifest and active aspects.

Lunar and solar — Symbolic terms for the lower reflected and higher illuminating orientations of mind in these passages.

Mahat — Universal Mind or cosmic intelligence. Mahat-mic is a related adjectival form used for this higher intelligent element.

Manas — The thinking principle or self-conscious mind; its higher individuality and lower personal ray are distinguished. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

Manifestation — The expression of reality through differentiated forms, relations, and conditions.

Manvantara — A period of manifested cosmic activity, contrasted with *pralaya*.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental principles and relations of reality beyond immediate appearances.

Overbrooding — Spiritually presiding over or illuminating a lower vehicle without being fully expressed through it.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories, and roles of a particular life, distinguished from the enduring individuality.

Renunciation — Relinquishment of selfish claims or attachment, so that thought and action can serve a wider purpose.

Sensorium — The combined field or instruments of sensory perception.

Taijasi — Radiant; in the quoted passage, *Manas* united with the higher spiritual principles.

Tanha — Thirst or craving for continued personal existence and sensation.

Vesture — A sheath or vehicle through which consciousness acts; often used of the temporary human instruments.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Consciousness and Existence” — p. 40

“From the standpoint of Buddhist metaphysics, an obsessive concern to extinguish the sense of ‘I’ entirely only amounts to a form of craving for nonexistence, a form of holding on to life. The same desire can exist both in a negative and a positive form.”

Meditation thought: The effort to extinguish the sense of self can become another form of attachment. Approach the inquiry through clearer understanding of identification, allowing self-consciousness to be educated rather than treated as an enemy.

2. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Consciousness and Existence” — p. 41

“This process, essential to cosmic manifestation, is the basis of limitation of consciousness in relation to manifested and differentiated matter. It is the basis, in some of the Puranic texts, for the depiction of *ahankara* as universal self-consciousness, coordinate with *Mahat* or universal mind. In these systems, however, there is a fundamental distinction between the lower forms of *ahankara*, related to an identification with a name and a form, or even individuated mind extending throughout a *manvantara*, and the highest form of *ahankara* associated with the cosmos.”

Meditation thought: The term ranges across different levels of manifestation. Keep the universal meaning distinct from the personal claim, so that a larger metaphysical idea does not become an excuse for enlarging the authority of a private preference.

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

“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. Owing to this exteriorization of all the sense organs and faculties, one has virtually no acquaintance with the vast internal range of these organs.”

Meditation thought: The passage uses the Theosophical language of elementals and astral impressions to describe habituated limitation. Its practical concern is the repeated search for security in external confirmation when a wider inward inquiry remains possible.

4. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Logos and Man” — p. 61

“From all it will require silence rooted in reticence, deepening and enriching calm contemplation, altering the ratio between the unmanifest and the manifest in every arena. Actually doing this is quite difficult because of the constant pressure on the defensive personality to manifest, a tendency fostered by contemporary culture and aggravated by the deadweight of atavistic habits of thought and ahankaric speech.”

Meditation thought: The pressure to express ourselves can hide the purpose of speaking. A moment of reticence may allow a thought to become clearer and more useful before it enters the conversation.

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Cognition, Breath and Speech” — p. 77

“Egoism must be clearly distinguished from egotism. Egoism is the pure sense of ‘I-am-I’ consciousness, bound up with the principle of individuation. It is possible to detach the pure sense of ‘I’ from every object and every kind of concern or conception which is centered upon a differentiated world.”

Meditation thought: Egoism has a special meaning here: the pure sense of self-consciousness, distinct from egotism. Consider the difference between being answerable for an action and requiring that the action continually affirm a personal image.

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Cognition, Breath and Speech” — p. 77

“Through an interior discipline of concentration, which may be called the *aham* meditation, it is possible to withdraw that sense of ‘I-am-I’ into itself to such a degree that it can light up a field of higher awareness. This is the ultimate reason for and the basis of the imperative importance of daily meditation.”

Meditation thought: The sense of “I” can be explored apart from its usual objects. Let concentration become an inquiry into awareness, without making a particular mood or inward image the final measure of the Self.

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Consciousness and Form” — pp. 118–119

“This risk is inherent in the very process of developing and specializing a concentrated egoity or sense of ‘I’ in relation to a name and a body, particular conditions and memories, desires and expectations. All of this involves exercising the principle of ‘I-ness’, *ahankara*, in ways that generate a sense of reality, but also bind down egoity in the realm of differentiated manifestation.”

Meditation thought: Identity takes shape through many temporary relations. Notice where a useful point of reference has become a rigid claim, making a changed circumstance feel like a threat to the whole person.

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Consciousness and Form” — p. 119

“Through identification with *kama*, the sensorium and the *linga sharira* or astral form, *Manas* has become beclouded. Therefore, *Atma-Buddhi*, though it is inseparable from pure thought and ideation, pure *Manas* and egoity, overbroods incarnated *Manas* but only at a distance. There is a persistent alienation from active Manasic self-consciousness owing to its involvement through matter and desire with the world of differentiation.”

Meditation thought: Identification can cloud the relation between the personal mind and its spiritual source. Study a desire or sensory preoccupation carefully, allowing the mind to regain a little freedom from what has absorbed it.

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Gestation and Growth” — p. 235

“Something of the meaning of this mysterious alchemical process can be glimpsed by contemplating the threefold nature of *ahankara*, which at its highest level is universal I-am-I consciousness. At its lowest level, the *ahankara* associated with the lunar self or the illusory personality should be made to serve as the necessary focal point of the magnetic field within which the manasic self-consciousness gains proficiency in the exercise of moral responsibility.”

Meditation thought: The personal focus has a constructive role in moral learning. Use it to take responsibility, while releasing the demand that every responsible act become evidence of personal importance.

10. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “The Diamond Sutra” — p. 127

“*Ahamkara* or egotism is so deep-seated and so pervasive that the very struggle to overcome it seems to facilitate its expression in newer and subtler forms. Similarly, the continual effort to free ourselves from personal preconceptions in our perceptions of the realities around us and in our relationships seems to engender new and unnoticed presuppositions, fresh and unseen barriers to understanding.”

Meditation thought: Self-importance can borrow the language of its own renunciation. Discovering this possibility invites honesty and another attempt; it need not become an elaborate new story of personal failure.

11. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Continuity of Consciousness” — p. 264

“Unfortunately, through possessiveness, through enormous thirst for sensation, through reassertion of *ahankara* — the drives inherent in the Fourth Round, whose dominant principle is *kama* — most humans tend to solidify, to concretize the moribund residues of the past.”

Meditation thought: An old identity can continue to organize experience after its circumstances have changed. Allow the present to make a fresh claim upon attention, without requiring it to preserve every residue of the past.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy* — p. 77

“This consciousness or mind is, III. *Manas*, the derivation or product in a reflected form of *Ahamkara*, ‘the conception of I,’ or EGO-SHIP. It is, therefore, when inseparably united to the first two, called the SPIRITUAL EGO, and *Taijasi* (the radiant). This is the real Individuality, or the divine man.”

Meditation thought: *Ahamkara* is the variant spelling used in this passage. The relation of *Manas* to the higher principles invites a more inclusive self-consciousness, whose development is expressed through responsibility rather than possessive self-assertion.