

Ahimsa Yagna

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Ahimsa Yagna names a sacrificial practice of nonviolence in which self-knowledge becomes cooperation with the life of Nature. *Ahimsa* means non-harming; *yagna*, also written *yajna*, means sacrifice or offering. Professor Iyer uses the combined expression in “Aquarian Spirituality” for the practical ideal of helping Nature and working with her. The emphasis is active. An offering is made through the disciplined use of human intelligence, feeling and will, so that personal energies contribute to a wider good. What is relinquished is the claim that our purposes may disregard the lives with which they are intertwined.

The expression belongs to a Theosophical understanding of a living cosmos. Nature is not merely a collection of inert materials available for any use we choose. Her visible forms participate in orders of life, consciousness and lawful relationship. In this setting, human beings are responsible participants whose thoughts and actions have effects beyond the immediate field of personal intention. Professor Iyer links the possibility of cooperation to an understanding of law. To help Nature requires observation, discrimination and a willingness to learn how things actually belong together, rather than assuming that sincerity alone makes an intervention wise.

HPB gives the central invitation in *The Voice of the Silence*: help Nature and work with her. The surrounding teaching joins this cooperation to the relinquishment of personal craving. Its meaning is therefore larger than the outward management of a pleasant environment. A person may admire landscapes while remaining heedless in speech or harsh towards companions. *Ahimsa Yagna* asks for continuity between these fields. The same aspiration towards harmlessness must increasingly inform the manner of thinking, the use of resources, and the treatment of beings whose needs may be inconvenient or difficult to understand.

Ahimsa is consequently more exacting than refraining from physical violence. In “*Sadhana Pada*,” Professor Iyer presents it as a discipline of body, speech and mind, and as the root of the yogic restraints. An unkind intention, a deliberate humiliation or a habit of provoking needless hostility can disturb the field of relationship even when no physical injury occurs. The recognition should sharpen responsibility without making every passing thought a reason for self-condemnation. The task is to notice what we are sustaining, withdraw our consent from destructive patterns, and cultivate a more truthful and benevolent response.

Yagna adds the character of an offering. Time, skill, comfort and preferred advantage may be relinquished for something that deserves care. In “*Manasadharmā*,” Professor Iyer joins sacrifice with the faithful performance of duty and with the awakening of spiritual will. The offering is

thus measured by its living usefulness, not by how dramatic it appears. Patient maintenance may be more valuable than a conspicuous gesture. A task completed reliably can spare others repeated difficulty. Work that no one notices may still participate in the quiet preservation of a community's life.

Imagine neighbours attending to a neglected watercourse. Before acting, they learn what is causing the obstruction and whose land, work and daily life will be affected. They seek appropriate knowledge, divide responsibilities and avoid making their enthusiasm a burden for others. The example is a contemporary application, not a technical instruction drawn from an ancient text. It illustrates how benevolent intention can be joined to patient enquiry. The offering includes listening, accepting limits and doing the less attractive tasks needed for a sound result. Cooperation becomes intelligent through its attention to the whole situation.

Human Solidarity is inseparable from that attention. People who bear the effects of a decision deserve to be heard, including those with little influence over it. The welfare of Nature and the welfare of humanity cannot be thoughtfully served by treating vulnerable people as expendable. Professor Iyer's synthesis joins self-knowledge with shared responsibility because both concern the overcoming of separative ignorance. Recognizing another person's difficulty does not obstruct a wider purpose. It often supplies the information and sympathy without which that purpose would remain an abstraction, impressive in speech but injurious in application.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception asks us to include relations that immediate desire leaves outside its frame. A convenient habit may impose costs upon distant workers, future neighbours or other forms of life. We cannot trace every consequence perfectly, but we can become more willing to investigate what matters and revise what proves harmful. This widening is not an invitation to paralysis. It supports proportionate action with clearer understanding. A small change, sustained and shared without self-righteousness, can become a more truthful offering than an impossible pledge that soon dissolves into discouragement.

Sacrifice itself needs discrimination. In *The Key to Theosophy*, HPB explicitly rejects rash and useless self-sacrifice and insists upon justice to oneself as part of collective humanity. *Ahimsa* therefore includes care in the use of the giver's own capacities. Exhaustion is not proof that an offering is spiritually superior, and another person's dependence should not be used to glorify our indispensability. Rest, cooperation and reasonable limits may preserve the capacity to serve. The aim is the good accomplished and the quality of relationship established, not the manufacture of a suffering identity.

Nonviolence also requires courage. It can involve refusing a harmful demand, speaking plainly about an abuse of trust, or accepting inconvenience in order to protect a shared good. Gentleness is not the avoidance of every difficult encounter. Its discipline concerns the motive and manner

of action: whether truth can be upheld without the additional pleasure of humiliation or revenge. Professor Iyer's account of Gandhi repeatedly joins *ahimsa* with truth and self-government. The resulting firmness seeks to reduce harm and awaken responsibility, even when agreement is not immediately possible.

The inward offering can be especially demanding. We may have to relinquish a cherished accusation, the wish to control how others respond, or the assumption that our knowledge is sufficient. These renunciations release energy for the work itself. In Theosophical terms, *Manas* becomes more receptive to *Buddhi* when intelligence is accompanied by inclusive sympathy and discernment. The mind is still required to distinguish, plan and judge. Its judgements become more useful as they are freed from the need to make the personal self the centre of every undertaking.

No individual begins with complete harmlessness. Embodied life presents difficult choices, incomplete knowledge and competing needs. The ideal remains a direction for disciplined learning. After acting, we can ask what was helped, what was overlooked, and what another person's experience reveals. Correction then becomes part of the offering. Professor Iyer's teaching makes room for the acquisition of practical wisdom through experience, while preserving the demand for integrity. A sincere mistake can become a lesson when it is acknowledged; a defended mistake can continue to injure long after its original cause has passed.

Ahimsa Yagna brings reverence into the ordinary materials of a day. A resource is used with care, a creature's distress receives attention, a disagreement is handled without needless cruelty, and an unfinished responsibility is carried a little further. Such acts need not be given a spiritual title in order to have value. Their deeper kinship lies in an intelligence learning to offer itself to life. The world is no longer encountered only as a field for personal assertion. It becomes a shared trust, inviting skill, restraint and the steady generosity of a heart willing to work with it.

Glossary

Ahimsa — Nonviolence or non-harming in body, speech and mind; the first of the yogic restraints.

Ahimsa Yagna — The sacrificial practice of nonviolence; Professor Iyer uses the expression for helping Nature and working with her.

Anasakti — Nonattachment, especially freedom from possessive attachment to the fruits of action; associated by Professor Iyer with selfless service.

Aparigraha — Non-possession or non-possessiveness; the restraint of the tendency to acquire and hold for the separate self.

Asteya — Non-stealing; refraining from theft and misappropriation, including their subtler forms in thought and feeling.

Atma Vidya — Spiritual Self-knowledge; knowledge of the divine nature of the human being.

Atman — The universal spiritual Self in Theosophy; also written *Atma*.

Brahmacharya — Continence and disciplined conduct; in the cited account, a wholehearted orientation towards spiritual truth.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman* in Theosophy, associated with intuitive discernment and the illumination of mind.

Discernment — The capacity to distinguish accurately; in spiritual contexts, insight into what is true and enduring.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relevant relationships, causes and responsibilities outside an immediate personal view.

Esoteric — Pertaining to an inward or deeper teaching whose understanding requires preparation and enquiry.

Evanescent — Passing or transitory, rather than enduring.

Gnosis — Direct spiritual knowledge or realization, distinguished from merely discursive or accumulated information.

Gupta Vidya — Secret or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected essays.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity and interdependence, made active through thoughtful responsibility and care.

Karma — The law of action and consequence; the relationships through which causes and their effects operate.

Mahavrata — The Great Vow; the universal ethical commitment constituted by the five *yamas*.

Manas — The thinking principle in Theosophy; mind capable of orientation towards desire or towards spiritual discernment.

Meritorious — Worthy or ethically beneficial; used of the responsible employment of resources.

Niyamas — The five binding observances of yoga: purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study and surrender to the divine.

Raja Yoga — The royal discipline of inward self-mastery, meditation and spiritual realization.

Sadhana — A sustained discipline or practice directed towards spiritual realization.

Satya — Truth or truthfulness; one of the five *yamas*.

Spiritual will — The power of self-conscious direction towards a worthy spiritual ideal, distinguished from merely personal insistence.

Taraka — Transcendent; used in the cited exposition of spiritual knowledge and the yogic path that reaches beyond ordinary limitations.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The transcendent royal discipline of yoga as expounded by Professor Iyer in his studies of Patanjali.

Transcendent — Beyond a particular level of limitation or conditioned experience.

Trusteeship — Responsible care and use of resources for a wider good; Professor Iyer develops its ethical meaning through Gandhi's teaching.

Yagna — Sacrifice or offering; also written *yajna*, associated here with selfless service and nonviolent cooperation.

Yamas — The five restraints of yoga: nonviolence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non-possession.

Yoga — An integrated discipline of ethical preparation, concentration and spiritual realization.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer, "Aquarian Spirituality," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 59.

"If human judgement and design are to have adequate leverage on Nature, they must have as their stable fulcrum an intuitive apprehension of law. At the most fundamental level, human judgement and natural law alike stand upon a common ground, a single transcendental source of Being. It is only by rejecting all dualisms, mediaeval or modern, and by refusing to absolutize polarities that the designs of men and the differentiations of Nature may be brought into self-conscious harmony. In *Gupta Vidya*, there is no cleavage between the aim of Self-knowledge (*Atma Vidya*) and the practical ideal of helping Nature and working on with her (*Ahimsa Yagna*)."

Meditation thought: Professor Iyer explicitly joins self-knowledge with helping Nature. The offering is intelligent cooperation grounded in an effort to understand the laws and relations of life.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 11.

“Desire nothing. Chafe not at Karma, nor at Nature's changeless laws. But struggle only with the personal, the transitory, the evanescent and the perishable. Help Nature and work on with her; and Nature will regard thee as one of her creators and make obeisance.”

Meditation thought: The invitation to help Nature accompanies the relinquishment of personal craving. Cooperation becomes possible as the demand to make everything serve the separate self is loosened.

3. R.N. Iyer, “*Sadhana Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 280.

“The *yamas* or restraints are five, constituting a firm ethical foundation for spiritual growth, starting with *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and including *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (continence) and *aparigraha* (non-possession). Shankaracharya held that *ahimsa* – non-violence, harmlessness, defencelessness in Shelley's phrase – is the most important of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and is the root of restraint.”

Meditation thought: Nonviolence supplies a root for the ethical disciplines. The sacrificial use of energy must therefore remain answerable to harmlessness in motive and action.

4. R.N. Iyer, “*Sadhana Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 281.

“For Patanjali, however, *ahimsa* and the other *yamas* and *niyamas* constitute the daily moral discipline needed to pursue *Taraka Raja Yoga*. *Taraka Raja Yoga* is not a narrowly technical or specialized practice to be added to other instrumental activities in the world; it is rather the indispensable means for radically transforming one's essential perception of, and therefore one's entire relation to, the world. From the standpoint of Self-knowledge, which is ultimate gnosis, there are no greater disciplines. Hence the *yamas* are not altered by condition and circumstance, social class or nationality, nor by time nor the actual level of spiritual attainment. Together they constitute the awesome *mahavrata* or Great Vow, the first crucial step to true spiritual freedom.”

Meditation thought: Ethical preparation changes one's relation to the world. It is the continuing substance of spiritual practice, not a preliminary formality that higher interests supersede.

5. R.N. Iyer, "The Seven Deadly Sins," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 347.

"At every point, there are unexpected opportunities for service to others and for relieving their spiritual distress. It is through humility, tolerance, and a willingness to work for the welfare of others that the constructive force of *ahimsa*, or love, is released. To abolish the separative ego is like removing an obscuring disc in front of the sun, allowing its beneficent light to stream forth."

Meditation thought: The constructive force of *ahimsa* appears through humility, tolerance and service. The image of released sunlight suggests how self-concern can obscure a benevolence already possible.

6. R.N. Iyer, "Manasadharma," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 358.

"What is redemptive about the human scene is that again and again, even amidst cowardice, passivity and inertia, there appear unexpected flashes of fearlessness that cleanse everything around them. Like rainfall – the grace of Nature – the self-sacrificing actions of heroic individuals refresh and regenerate society, quickening the seeds of human growth."

Meditation thought: Self-sacrificing action can renew the shared moral field. Its influence may exceed what the giver sees, especially when it awakens courage in other lives.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Manasadharma," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 362.

"Rooted in *anasakti* and *yajna*, ever doing the utmost and the best that one can do, one can use every situation with benevolence and integrity in the service of universal good. Out of one's accumulated experience one may acquire what Gautama Buddha called 'skilful means'. Mistakes are an essential ingredient in gaining the kind of practical wisdom that applies to all the planetary forces. Long before an ordinary human being is ready to engage in this practical training, he must acquire through self-effort the requisite moral qualifications."

Meditation thought: A worthy offering learns from experience. Benevolence is strengthened by integrity, practical judgement and the willingness to correct a method that has proved inadequate.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Gandhian Trusteeship," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 336.

"We incarnate our divinity when we deliberately and joyously nurture our abilities and assets for the sake of the larger good. In this sense, the finest exemplars of trusteeship are those who treat all possessions as though they were sacred or deeply precious beyond any worldly scale of valuation. Thus, it is only through daily moral choice and the meritorious use of resources that we sustain our inherited or acquired entitlements."

Meditation thought: Resources become offerings through their use. Care for an ability or possession can itself serve the larger good when it increases what may responsibly be shared.

9. R.N. Iyer, "The Seven Deadly Sins," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 347.

"In no case, however, should one allow oneself to become hypnotized by the essentially banal and boring assemblage of one's sins and vices. It is like the story Gautama Buddha told of the man wounded by a poisoned arrow. Instead of pulling it out, he succumbed while asking many questions about the arrow maker, the material of the shaft, the type of poison and the feathers with which the arrow was fletched. In thinking of the seven deadly sins in relation to non-violence, the emphasis should be upon the ability to awaken spiritual vision, to recover the lost virtues of the soul, and to release a current of healing sympathy and love towards all other human beings."

Meditation thought: The purpose of examining harmful tendencies is to release a better response. Dwelling upon faults becomes sterile when it displaces the work of healing sympathy and love.

10. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, "On Self-Sacrifice," p. 136.

"We say, however, that self-sacrifice has to be performed with discrimination; and such a self-abandonment, if made without justice, or blindly, regardless of subsequent results, may often prove not only made in vain, but harmful. One of the fundamental rules of Theosophy is, justice to oneself —viewed as a unit of collective humanity, not as a personal self-justice, not more but not less than to others; unless, indeed, by the sacrifice of the one self we can benefit the many."

Meditation thought: Discrimination protects sacrifice from needless harm. Justice to the giver and to those affected belongs within the offering, rather than standing outside its spiritual purpose.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 10.

"Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce Sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye."

Meditation thought: Compassion is directed towards a living need. The image asks that another being's suffering reach the heart and move it towards timely care.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, "On Charity," p. 139.

"The Theosophical ideas of charity mean personal exertion for others; personal mercy and kindness; personal interest in the welfare of those who suffer; personal sympathy, forethought and assistance in their troubles or needs."

Meditation thought: Personal concern gives generosity its human texture. A useful offering attends to the circumstances, dignity and inward life of the person it seeks to help.