

Aparigraha

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Aparigraha means non-possession or non-possessiveness. In the discipline of yoga it is one of the five *yamas*, the restraints that establish an ethical foundation for meditation. The term reaches beyond the number of objects a person owns. It examines the inward grasp by which we try to make things, advantages and even relationships secure extensions of ourselves. Professor Iyer develops its practical meaning through Gandhian trusteeship: resources entrusted to our care are to be understood in relation to the good they can serve. The question becomes how faithfully we use what passes through our hands.

Non-possession can sound like an instruction to have nothing. The deeper difficulty, however, is not settled by an inventory. A nearly empty room can contain an intensely possessive mind, while considerable responsibilities may be administered with modesty and public concern. This does not excuse accumulation or make material arrangements irrelevant. It directs attention to their causes and uses. What is genuinely needed? What is maintained merely to reassure the personal image? What remains idle while another person lacks something essential? *Aparigraha* asks that such questions enter the actual management of life.

In “Gandhian Trusteeship,” Professor Iyer describes the trustee as self-governing, morally sensitive and attentive to unmet human needs. The trustee cultivates abilities and assets rather than neglecting them. A gift becomes more useful through care, training and intelligent application. Yet its growth is directed beyond the narrow advantage of its holder. This gives renunciation a constructive meaning. We can maintain a tool, develop a skill or preserve a book because it may serve well, without treating the possession as proof that we are more complete or more important than someone else.

The distinction from *asteya* is helpful. *Asteya* concerns refraining from theft and misappropriation, including their subtler forms in thought and feeling. *Aparigraha* questions the possessive relation even to what has been acquired with permission. Something may be legally ours while inwardly becoming a source of fear, comparison and exclusion. The ethical enquiry therefore extends beyond entitlement. It does not attempt to settle every question of ownership by a single slogan. It asks how the consciousness of ownership can be transformed into the responsibility of stewardship, with due regard for those affected.

Imagine being given the keys to a room of shared equipment. The keys confer access, but their purpose is the responsible use of the equipment. If their holder begins to enjoy making everyone ask for favours, administration has quietly turned into personal power. The same room can be

cared for differently: clear arrangements, timely repairs, fair access and attention to future users. Nothing mystical needs to be claimed about this example. It simply reveals a change of motive. What was an opportunity to establish importance becomes an opportunity to make useful activity easier for others.

Professor Iyer's treatment places that change within a larger spiritual understanding. Human faculties and material forms are mutable; they belong to a living order that no personality has created or can finally retain. The attempt to secure permanence through possession mistakes the nature of both the possessor and the thing possessed. The deeper Self is not completed by an accumulation of external signs. When this begins to be understood, the mind has less need to ask objects to provide an inward sufficiency they cannot supply. Resources can then be appreciated more truthfully in their proper place.

Such appreciation is compatible with beauty, gratitude and enjoyment. Professor Iyer invokes the Upanishadic association of renunciation with enjoyment and insists upon the motives behind allocation and use. A loved object need not be despised in order to be held lightly. One may value its craftsmanship, remember the affection through which it arrived, and care for it well. Possessiveness appears when the relationship hardens into a claim that excludes every other consideration. The possibility of sharing, lending or eventually passing it on can reveal whether affection has room to breathe.

Human Solidarity gives this enquiry its necessary breadth. Our resources stand within networks of labour, knowledge and cooperation. Even a private accomplishment depends upon language, instruction and opportunities received from others. Recognition of those relations softens the fantasy of isolated self-sufficiency. It also makes the unmet needs of neighbours more difficult to dismiss as someone else's concern. The practice must remain discriminating: obligations to dependants, continuity of useful work and one's own reasonable needs all belong within the field of responsibility. Generosity is strengthened by seeing that field clearly.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception can begin with a familiar household decision. Before acquiring another object, we may consider its intended use, the attention it will require, the resources already available, and whether sharing would meet the need. This is an application of trusteeship, not a universal formula for every purchase. The value lies in extending perception beyond immediate attraction. Sometimes the thoughtful answer will be to obtain the thing and use it well. Sometimes it will be to repair, borrow, share or simply let the desire pass without turning deprivation into a drama.

The same discipline reaches inward. We may try to possess another person's admiration, a place in a group, or the right always to be consulted. These claims can survive every outward simplification. *Aparigraha* invites respect for the freedom of others and for the changing

character of relationships. Care can remain constant while its expressions alter. Allowing a younger person to discover an independent way, or welcoming another worker's competence, can be a real renunciation of possessive habit. What is released is the claim to be indispensable; what may grow is a more generous companionship.

Professor Iyer gives special weight to small, unconditional commitments. Returning what has been borrowed is a simple instance: the promise remains binding whether the lender is agreeable, irritating or careless with our own belongings. Such a resolve brings thought and conduct into agreement. It also exposes the exceptions through which possessiveness protects itself. The practice need not begin with a grand public gesture. A modest undertaking, honestly kept and thoughtfully examined, can make a deeper change credible. The mind learns that freedom is exercised through choices within reach.

HPB's discussion of self-sacrifice supplies an essential measure. Theosophy requires discrimination and justice, including justice to oneself as a member of humanity. Non-possession does not authorize neglect of a dependent person or careless disposal of something entrusted for a particular purpose. Nor does it make material hardship a sign of spiritual inferiority or attainment. The ethical task is to clarify the use of resources in the circumstances actually present. A person with little may practise a remarkable generosity; a person with much has correspondingly extensive opportunities and responsibilities.

Aparigraha gradually changes the meaning of having. The keys, the tools, the talent and the hour of available attention become occasions for trustworthy care. We are less occupied with proving that they belong to us and more attentive to what may be accomplished through them. Such freedom need not announce itself. It may be felt in a room where things are well tended, in a relationship with room for another person's growth, or in an act of sharing that creates no debt of submission. The heart becomes a better trustee of what life has placed within its reach.

Glossary

Altruism — A concern for the welfare of others that moves beyond exclusive personal advantage.

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.

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

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

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

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

Misappropriation — Taking or using something entrusted or belonging to another in a way that violates its proper purpose or rightful claim.

Noetic — Pertaining to spiritual intelligence and the higher activity of mind, distinguished from merely personal or reactive thought.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, roles and memories of an embodied life, distinguished in Theosophy from spiritual individuality.

Probationary — Pertaining to a period of testing and preparation; used of the opportunities of embodied spiritual learning.

Self — With a capital letter in this spiritual context, the enduring or universal spiritual principle, distinguished from the possessive personal self.

Sojourn — A temporary stay; used of embodied life as an opportunity for learning.

Tapas — Austerity or self-discipline; the deliberate ordering of energy towards spiritual purification and self-mastery.

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

Upanishadic — Pertaining to the Upanishads, Indian sacred texts concerned with spiritual reality and Self-knowledge.

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, "The Seven Deadly Sins," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 345.

"Gandhi elaborated a similar conception by extolling the virtues of *asteya*, non-stealing, and *aparigraha*, non-possession, as essential to the votary of non-violence. His own individual stance towards personal possessions is well known, but he also put forth a subtle theory of

trusteeship for all external goods as an ethically superior alternative to the violence of aggressive capitalism as well as militant communism.”

Meditation thought: Non-possession is placed beside non-stealing and nonviolence. Trusteeship gives the relinquishment of possessiveness a constructive form through responsible use.

2. 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: Abilities and assets become occasions for service. Their cultivation honours the larger good when care is joined to a generous understanding of entitlement.

3. R.N. Iyer, “Gandhian Trusteeship,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 342.

“A trustee is one who self-consciously assumes responsibility for upholding, protecting and putting to good use whatever he possesses, acquires or earns. For an individual to be a trustee in any meaningful sense implies that he is self-governing and morally sensitive. He is acutely aware of the unmet needs of others and, simultaneously, is capable of controlling and transmuting his own appropriating tendencies.”

Meditation thought: A trustee attends both to resources and to unmet needs. Self-government matters because the usefulness of what is held depends upon the motives directing it.

4. R.N. Iyer, “Gandhian Trusteeship,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 342.

“It is precisely because he sees his abilities and possessions as belonging to God, mankind or to future generations that he is eager to use them to the maximum. His posture towards his overall resources is therefore not one of a lazy or selfish indifference. He is not concerned with hoarding nor is he fearful of multiplying his gifts, talents and possessions. Like the good servant in the New Testament, he wishes to increase his meagre ‘talents’, but not for his own sake, nor merely for his own family.”

Meditation thought: Non-possession does not imply neglect. A gift may be developed and increased precisely because its value reaches beyond the holder’s private benefit.

5. R.N. Iyer, “Gandhian Trusteeship,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 343.

“Grandiose gestures about giving up external possessions and impulsive statements about our good intentions have little practical impact on our character. The initial step should be at the level of thought. We should think clearly and deeply about the principles of trust and trusteeship. What does trusteeship mean as an idea and as an ideal? What are its practical implications? And what would we have to give up for it to become a potent mantram in our

lives? This form of reflection and self-questioning initiates a period of 'mental gestation'. It allows us to strengthen our understanding, dispel illusions and light the subtle fire of altruism."

Meditation thought: A change in outward arrangements needs a corresponding change in understanding. Honest enquiry can expose the assumptions that make possessiveness seem necessary or natural.

6. R.N. Iyer, "Gandhian Trusteeship," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 343.

"If wholeheartedness or total renunciation is the ideal, we might ask ourselves, do little renunciations count? Yes, so long as they are unconditional. If, for example, I promise myself to return all that I borrow, then this promise is binding in relation to my children, to people I like, to people I dislike and to those who rarely return what I lend them. This illustrates the principle that non-possession (*aparigraha*) presupposes a change of heart, not merely a change of intellectual viewpoint. To be genuine, the change of heart must come about non-violently through the *tapas* of a self-imposed discipline. This is why Gandhi encourages us to integrate unconditional commitment with both philosophical thought and mature self-honesty."

Meditation thought: A small commitment becomes morally substantial when it is kept without convenient exceptions. The example concerns a change of heart expressed through reliable conduct.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Gandhian Trusteeship," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 344.

"We might ask ourselves what it means to simplify our wants or needs in a Gandhian manner. It would seem that we can simplify our lives in at least two primary senses. First of all, we can make a concerted effort to reduce the sheer number of encrusted desires and habit-patterns that vitiate our altruistic impulses and fond dreams for others. We self-consciously check the tendency of the aggressive and expansive self to acquire more at the expense of others. But secondly, we take care to do this discriminatingly. We must, like the smelter and the goldsmith, extract and refine the pure metal from the crude ore."

Meditation thought: Simplification requires discrimination. The work is to recognize what obstructs generosity and distinguish genuine needs from the multiplying demands of personal acquisition.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Gandhian Trusteeship," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 344.

"We want not just less possessive desires but more benevolent ones. Furthermore, as we cleanse the energy of desire, we purify our imagination. When we gain control over imagination, we establish mind control and render ourselves capable of using all personal, financial and other resources skilfully. We are more earthed, so to speak. With minds unclouded by vain imaginings, we feel more in charge of ourselves and are more responsive to the needs of fellow human beings. Our feeling for what others may attain is gradually

enriched, whilst our fantasies about what we hope to acquire wane. We eventually insert our resources into the expanding circle of human interdependence.”

Meditation thought: The energy released from possessive fantasy can become resourcefulness for others. A wider imagination notices possibilities for shared growth that acquisitiveness overlooks.

9. R.N. Iyer, “*Sadhana Pada*,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 282.

“... strengthening oneself through *asteya* (non-stealing), one desists from every form of misappropriation, even on the plane of thought and feeling, and discovers what is apposite on all sides. Nature protects and even provides for those who do not appropriate its abundant resources. *Brahmacharya*, selfless continence in thought and conduct, fosters vitality and vigour. *Aparigraha*, non-possessiveness, promotes noetic insight into the deeper meaning and purpose of one's probationary sojourn on earth.”

Meditation thought: Professor Iyer links non-possession with insight into the purpose of life. The promise concerns a spiritual orientation, not a bargain guaranteeing material prosperity.

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: Justice includes the giver as part of humanity. Renunciation should preserve responsible care, especially where other people depend upon what has been entrusted to us.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, "On Self-Sacrifice," p. 137.

"But it is his duty to sacrifice his own comfort, and to work for others if they are unable to work for themselves. It is his duty to give all that which is wholly his own and can benefit no one but himself if he selfishly keeps it from others. Theosophy teaches self-abnegation, but does not teach rash and useless self-sacrifice, nor does it justify fanaticism."

Meditation thought: HPB distinguishes useful self-giving from fanaticism. The ethical question is how a resource can truly benefit life, rather than how dramatic its relinquishment may appear.

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: A generous act gains depth through understanding and personal concern. The object given is only one part of the relationship through which another person is helped.