

Asmita

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

A correction can trouble us far beyond the matter being corrected. An error in a piece of work becomes a verdict on our worth; a difference of opinion becomes a threat to who we are. *Asmita* helps explain this expansion. In Patanjali's yoga, it is egoism in a precise sense: the identification of the power of the Seer with the instrument of seeing. The term concerns the mistaken location of selfhood. Pride and defensiveness may follow from it, but its roots reach deeper than an unpleasant manner.

Professor Iyer places *asmita* among the five *kleshas*. *Avidya*, ignorance, is their common ground; *asmita* gives that ignorance the form of a claimant. What is perceived, possessed, thought, or felt is gathered around an apparent center and taken as the self. The essential distinction is between *purusha*, spiritual consciousness, and *prakriti*, the field of Nature in which instruments and experiences arise. When this distinction is obscured, the changing apparatus of experience is asked to bear the authority of the enduring Self.

The source makes the error especially subtle by naming *buddhi* as the power of sight with which the Seer is confused. In this yogic analysis, even the most refined cognitive instrument belongs to what is seen. This use should be understood in its context. Theosophical teaching also uses *Buddhi* to name spiritual intuition and wisdom. The point is not to depreciate spiritual discernment, but to distinguish the illumination of an instrument from the ultimate source of knowing.

Asmita can attach itself to success, yet it can also inhabit a painful self-image. Someone may defend the conviction of being unappreciated as fiercely as another defends a reputation for brilliance. In both cases, a particular construction has acquired the weight of identity. This does not make every expression of sadness or confidence an affliction. It directs attention to the claim beneath the feeling: must this account of myself be preserved even when it prevents a more truthful response?

Raga and *dvesha* develop around this claimant. Experiences which seem to secure it are pursued; experiences which threaten it are resisted. A compliment becomes nourishment, a criticism becomes danger, and comparison supplies an unstable measure of existence. *Abhinivesha* extends the movement into clinging to the familiar form of selfhood. The same pattern may continue through changing circumstances because the demand for self-confirmation has survived the change. Understanding the relation among these afflictions makes their recurrence less mysterious.

Professor Iyer describes the *kleshas* as producing mental deposits which reinforce their operation. The personality learns to interpret events through its established claims. A person entering a meeting may already be measuring who receives attention, whose suggestions prevail, and whether their own place is secure. The actual work recedes. *Asmita* does not need an extravagant display; it can quietly arrange the entire field of attention around an unspoken demand to count in a particular way.

The remedy requires more than an effort to look modest. A performance of self-effacement can preserve the same inward occupation. We begin more honestly by noticing the attachment and considering what the situation actually calls for. If a correction is sound, it can be used. If it is mistaken, it can be answered with reasons. In either case, the response need not carry the additional burden of proving an entire personal identity. This gives thought more freedom and makes disagreement less injurious.

Consider a volunteer who has organized a useful project for years. New participants propose a change. The familiar role may feel endangered, even though the new idea serves the original purpose. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception includes the people who will benefit, the capacities of the newcomers, and the future of the work. The organizer may retain important responsibilities while sharing judgment and knowledge. Continuity is then secured through a common purpose, rather than through dependence on one person's indispensability.

This example gives Human Solidarity a particular meaning. The worth of a shared undertaking exceeds the recognition it gives its participants. Blavatsky's practical counsel in *The Key to Theosophy* asks members to contribute what they can and warns against overvaluing personal progress while leaving common burdens to a few. Read within its organizational setting, the counsel exposes a recurring spiritual temptation. We can become absorbed in the story of our development while overlooking the unglamorous work through which others are sustained.

The distinction between individuality and personality is therefore essential. Professor Iyer's account of noetic self-determination locates a deeper power of choice in *Manas*, beyond the habits of the psychic personality. Spiritual individuality is not identical with the separative claim described by *asmita*. Releasing a false identification need not diminish integrity or moral agency. It can make agency less dependent on applause and less captive to shame, so that a person acts from a steadier understanding of responsibility.

The personality itself remains a needed instrument of embodied life. Its abilities, history, and relationships provide occasions for learning and service. Hatred of the personality can become another form of self-absorption, consuming the energy that might have been used for useful action. The more fruitful question is how the instrument is being directed. A skilled musician

cares for an instrument without confusing it with the music's entire source and purpose. The analogy gives self-discipline a tone of intelligent stewardship.

The word *asmita* also appears in the discussion of meditative absorption. Professor Iyer describes stages in which reasoning, deliberation, and bliss recede until a refined sense of "I" remains. Even this limiting focus can be transcended. The meditative use should not be collapsed into ordinary vanity. It concerns a subtler boundary within consciousness. Holding the two contexts together helps the student recognize the depth of the inquiry without turning every calm inward experience into a claim of advanced attainment.

Dhyana, meditation, and the disciplines that support it gradually reverse mistaken identification. *Vairagya* loosens appropriation; *svadhyaya* examines motive and assumption; *ishvarapranidhana* directs the will toward the divine. These practices work together with truthful conduct. An insight into selflessness has little practical substance if we continue to make others bear the cost of our defensiveness. Conversely, a simple willingness to acknowledge an error can express a meaningful change in the use of mind, even before the philosophy is fully understood.

This distinction can change the tone of self-examination. We need enough honesty to recognize a possessive claim, and enough proportion to avoid making the discovery our whole identity. The error calls for correction; the capacity to recognize it is already an opening through which correction can begin.

The progress can be quiet. We allow another person's contribution to stand without immediately adding our own. We correct a mistake without supplying an elaborate defense of our intentions. We receive gratitude without making it a demand for future loyalty. Such acts do not prove the eradication of *asmita*, but they give the deeper aspiration a present form. They also release others from the pressure to keep confirming an image we have become afraid to relinquish.

The Seer is not made greater by personal triumph or diminished by a corrected opinion. To contemplate this is to loosen the burden placed upon the instruments of experience. They can be trained, repaired, and used with care. In that freedom, individuality becomes more capable of service, because it no longer needs every encounter to certify its importance. The work can be done well, another's light can be welcomed, and the shared purpose can remain at the center.

Glossary

Abhinivesha — Clinging to conditioned existence; one of the five afflictions in Patanjali's yoga.

Ananda — Bliss; in the quoted passage, a condition within cognitive contemplation.

Asmita — Egoism or identification of the power of seeing with its instrument.

Avidya — Fundamental ignorance or mistaken identification, from which the other afflictions arise.

Bhavana — Cultivation or contemplative development; used of the process of meditation.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Dvesha — Aversion or repulsion; one of the five afflictions.

Ishvarapranidhana — Surrender or devotion to the divine Lord within; one of the yogic observances.

Kama — Desire; the principle associated with personal craving and the psychic use of mind.

Klesha — An affliction that binds consciousness; *kleshas* is the plural.

Kshanti — Patience, forbearance, or endurance, joined here to detachment in spiritual practice.

Manas — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice.

Prakriti — Nature or the field of manifestation, distinguished from *Purusha* in Patanjali's yoga.

Purusha — The Seer or spiritual consciousness, distinguished from the changing field of *Prakriti*.

Raga — Attachment or attraction that binds consciousness to its objects.

Sadhana — Sustained spiritual practice integrating discipline, study, and devotion.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; a discipline with gradations culminating in spiritual cognition.

Samprajnata Samadhi — Cognitive or seeded contemplation; the source also uses the spelling *sanprajnata samadhi*.

Svadyaya — Sacred study and self-examination, deepening toward contemplation of the Self.

Tapas — The concentrated effort of contemplation, self-discipline, and purification.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Vichara — Reflective inquiry or deliberation, used in the account of meditative absorption.

Vitarka — Reasoning or deliberative attention at an initial level of meditative absorption.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“Patanjali initiated his teaching concerning praxis by calling attention to the three chief elements in the discipline of yoga: *tapas*, austerity, self-restraint and eventually self-mastery; *svadhyaya*, self-study, self-examination, including calm contemplation of *purusha*, the Supreme Self; and *ishvarapranidhana*, self-surrender to the Lord, the omnipresent divine spirit within the secret heart. The threefold practice or *sadhana* can remove the *kleshas* or afflictions which imprison *purusha* and thus facilitate *samadhi* or meditative absorption.”

Meditation thought: Allow the threefold discipline to redirect effort away from personal display. Spiritual work needs an inward purpose greater than self-confirmation.

2. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“The *kleshas*, though varied in their myriad manifestations, are essentially five: *avidya*, ignorance; *asmita*, egoism; *raga*, attachment; *dvesha*, aversion; and *abhinivesha*, tenacious clinging to mundane existence. Ignorance, however, is the broad field in which all the other *kleshas* arise, because they are no more than distinct specializations of ignorance.”

Meditation thought: Observe how ignorance takes the form of a claimant. What experience has become something the personality feels compelled to defend?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“Ignorance is a fundamental inverted confusion which mistakes *prakriti* for *purusha*, the false for the true, the impure for the pure, and the painful for the pleasurable – a persisting malaise which might have been difficult to comprehend in the past but which is now a familiar condition in contemporary psychology.”

Meditation thought: Consider the difference between a changing instrument and its spiritual source. Do not ask an opinion or role to establish enduring selfhood.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“Springing from fundamental ignorance, egoism (*asmita*) confuses the potency of the Seer (*purusha*) with the power of sight (*buddhi*). Attachment (*raga*) is the pursuit of what is mistaken to be pleasurable, whilst aversion (*dvesha*) flees from what is believed to be painful.”

Meditation thought: Notice the appropriation of perception. Can the fact be examined without making agreement with your interpretation a condition of relationship?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“Since the *kleshas* are engendered by a persistent error, at root mistaking *prakriti* for *purusha*, or attributing the essential characteristics of *purusha* to one or another aspect of *prakriti*, they can be eliminated only by a radical reversal of the downward tendency of alienation and retreat from truth. This fundamental correction, as far-reaching as the entrenched habit of inversion which necessitates it, is *dhyana*, meditation, together with the mental and moral exercises which strengthen it.”

Meditation thought: Bring the correction of identification into meditation and daily conduct. The distinction becomes useful through the way it changes a response.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“In the graphic language of spiritual physiology, the *kleshas* constitute a psychic colouring or peculiar obsession which forms a persisting matrix of karma, the results of which must eventually be experienced, and also creates mental deposits which channel mental energies into repeatedly reinforcing the *kleshas*.”

Meditation thought: Watch the reinforcement of a personal story. Repeated defense can make a passing interpretation feel like an unquestionable identity.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“*Dhyana* alone can effectively eradicate these mental deposits while providing the clear detachment (*vairagya*) and cool patience (*kshanti*) to exhaust and dissolve the karmic matrix over time. As long as the *kleshas* remain, involuntary incarnation into bodies captive to the pleasure-pain principle is inescapable.”

Meditation thought: Let patience accompany the release of self-appropriation. A returning claim can be recognized without being renewed.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, pp. 272–273.

“In its least abstracted form, *sanprajnata samadhi* involves *vitarka* (reasoning), *vichara* (deliberation), *ananda* (bliss) and *asmita* (the sense of ‘I’). Meditation is some sort of *bhavana*, or becoming that upon which one ponders, for consciousness identifies with, takes on and virtually becomes what it contemplates. Meditation on a seed passes through stages in which these types of conditioning recede and vanish as the focal point of consciousness passes beyond every kind of deliberation and even bliss itself, until only *asmita* or the pure sense of ‘I’ remains. Even this, however, is a limiting focus which can be transcended.”

Meditation thought: Keep the meditative sense of “I” distinct from ordinary vanity. Even a refined focal point has a scope and a limit in this account.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Noetic Self-Determination”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 273.

“Whereas *Manas* itself is noetic, and signifies what could be called the spiritual individuality, there is also that which may be called the psychic individuality — this same *Manas* in association with *kama*, or desire. This projected ray of *Manas* itself has a capacity, though intermittent, for a kind of free will.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish spiritual individuality from the personality’s claims. Integrity and responsible choice need not depend on self-importance.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Noetic Self-Determination”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 273.

“The projected ray of *Manas* is the basis of the psychic nature and potentially the organ of free will in physical man. *Manas* itself is the basis of the higher self-conscious will, which has no special organ, but is capable, independent of the brain and personality, of functioning on its own. This noetic individuality is distinct from the projected ray of lower *Manas*, which is its organ, and distinct too from the physical brain and body, which are the organs of the psychic lower *Manas*.”

Meditation thought: Examine the association of thought with desire. Which motive is directing the powers of mind in the action before you?

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 30.

“Even in some exoteric public branches, the members pledge themselves on their ‘Higher Self’ to live the life prescribed by Theosophy. They have to bring their Divine Self to guide their every thought and action, every day and at every moment of their lives.”

Meditation thought: Let the higher aspiration become a guide to one concrete act. The daily use of thought gives inward allegiance its practical meaning.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 143.

“No working member should set too great value on his personal progress or proficiency in Theosophic studies; but must be prepared rather to do as much altruistic work as lies in his power. He should not leave the whole of the heavy burden and responsibility of the Theosophical movement on the shoulders of the few devoted workers. Each member ought to feel it his duty to take what share he can in the common work, and help it by every means in his power.”

Meditation thought: Place useful participation beside concern for personal progress. What share of a common burden can be carried quietly and faithfully?