

Asteya

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Asteya means non-stealing. As one of the five *yamas* in the discipline of yoga, it establishes a relation of honesty towards what belongs to others and towards the resources of the shared world. Its most obvious demand is to refrain from taking what has not been given. Professor Iyer extends the enquiry to misappropriation in thought and feeling, where the desire to take may be concealed beneath courtesy or respectable habit. *Asteya* therefore asks for more than clean hands. It asks for a consciousness that can recognize another being's due and leave it intact.

The ethical setting matters. In "*Sadhana Pada*," Professor Iyer places *asteya* alongside nonviolence, truthfulness, continence and non-possession. These restraints support one another and form a foundation for meditation. A mind occupied with obtaining an unfair advantage is already rehearsing concealment, justification and comparison. Such activity disturbs the very instrument through which deeper understanding is sought. By learning to cease misappropriation, the student begins to remove a source of inward division. Conduct and contemplation become parts of one discipline because the mind brought to meditation has been shaped throughout the day.

Asteya and *aparigraha* are closely related, yet their emphases differ. *Aparigraha* examines possessiveness, including our relation to things legitimately entrusted to us. *Asteya* brings the taking itself into view: the movement by which another person's property, contribution or rightful opportunity is made to serve our advantage without proper regard. *Anasakti* adds a further perspective by questioning attachment to the fruits of action. Keeping these meanings distinct makes self-study more exact. We can ask whether we have taken unfairly, whether we are holding possessively, and whether our work has become dependent upon personal reward.

The distinction is easy to recognize when someone borrows a tool. Permission to use it includes an implicit responsibility to care for it and return it as agreed. If inconvenience becomes a reason to keep it indefinitely, a small appropriation has occurred. We may still think of ourselves as helpful and considerate, yet the lender is deprived of something entrusted in good faith. *Asteya* becomes active through a plain repair: return the tool, acknowledge any damage, and make the arrangement clearer next time. The correction restores reliability without requiring an elaborate performance of guilt.

A subtler instance appears when several people contribute to an idea. One person may present the result as an individual achievement, omitting the suggestion that made the work possible or the patient labour that brought it into form. The appropriation is then a matter of recognition.

Giving accurate credit is a practical expression of *asteya* because it allows the history of the work to remain truthful. It also leaves companions freer to contribute again. An atmosphere in which recognition is quietly shared can support cooperation more deeply than repeated declarations about the value of teamwork.

Professor Iyer's language about thought and feeling invites careful interpretation. An inward image of another person is not that person's whole reality. To treat someone merely as a source of reassurance, admiration or emotional labour can become a possessive demand. Applying *asteya* here means attending to consent, reciprocity and the other person's circumstances. Ordinary needs for affection and assistance are not themselves theft. The ethical question concerns how those needs are pursued, especially when persuasion conceals pressure or when gratitude is expected to become a permanent obligation. Clarity protects both care and freedom.

The deeper source of appropriation is explored in "The Seven Deadly Sins." Professor Iyer describes acquisitiveness as an attempt to answer an inward deficiency through external goods. The attempt remains unsatisfied because the goods cannot provide the spiritual sufficiency being sought through them. From this standpoint, non-stealing is more than a prohibition imposed upon desire. It belongs to a reorientation of identity. The enduring value of a human being does not depend upon collecting advantages at another's expense. Recognition of this possibility can begin to release the fear that one must take in order to become real.

Human Solidarity gives non-stealing a positive purpose. Each act of honesty helps preserve the conditions under which people can trust one another. A shared fund, a borrowed object, an accurate account or a confidential conversation becomes safer when those involved respect its proper use. Such trust has practical value, but it also acknowledges human dignity. The person affected is allowed to remain a participant with legitimate interests, rather than being reduced to an obstacle or an opportunity. *Asteya* thus contributes to a common moral environment in which generosity need not continually defend itself against exploitation.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception extends the enquiry beyond an immediate gain. Before claiming more than our share of a common resource, we can consider those absent from the decision and those who will depend upon it later. This application may concern water, shared space, a colleague's available time or the use of a community's knowledge. The situations differ and require judgement. The common movement is to let the wider consequences enter perception. What appears negligible when viewed from one person's convenience may become significant when the whole relationship is taken into account.

The traditional teaching also associates established non-stealing with a changed relation to Nature's abundance. Professor Iyer writes that Nature protects and provides for those who refrain from appropriation. Within his spiritual exposition, the statement points towards

harmony with a larger order. It should not be turned into a bargain promising material wealth in exchange for good behaviour. Honest people can encounter severe hardship, and their circumstances do not invalidate their integrity. The nearer lesson is that relinquishing the habit of taking makes us more able to recognize what is fitting, sufficient and freely offered.

This discipline must also govern the handling of sacred teachings. To present another writer's words as our own, or to lend a private interpretation an authority the source does not grant it, obscures the reader's freedom to understand and judge. Accurate attribution is therefore an ethical act. It honours the labour of teachers and protects the integrity of transmission. The same care applies to disagreement. One can question a conclusion while representing it fairly, allowing the other person's actual thought to remain visible instead of substituting a convenient caricature.

When a failure is recognized, restitution gives the recognition substance. Something may need to be returned, a credit corrected, a confidence honoured more carefully, or an apology offered without demanding immediate absolution. Not every consequence can be undone, but future conduct can become more reliable. Professor Iyer's wider teaching favours self-correction over fascination with one's faults. The aim is to restore the power to act truthfully. Patiently repeated, such corrections help the mind relinquish the elaborate defences through which small dishonesties become settled habits and then appear normal.

Asteya leaves a distinctive quietness behind it. We need not keep inventing reasons why an unfair advantage was deserved, nor anxiously protect a credit that was never wholly ours. Attention becomes available for work, friendship and study. A contribution can be offered openly, and a gift can be received as a gift. In the larger discipline of yoga, this honesty prepares the mind for a clearer apprehension of truth. In the life shared with others, it makes our presence more trustworthy: what is placed in our care can remain whole, and what another has earned can remain another's due.

Glossary

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

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

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.

Appropriation — Taking or claiming for oneself; its ethical meaning includes the misuse of another's property, contribution, trust or attention.

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.

Contemplative — Pertaining to sustained, reflective or meditative attention directed towards meaning and spiritual understanding.

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

Gunas — The three qualities of *prakriti*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, associated with luminosity, activity and inertia.

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

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

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

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

Prakriti — Nature or primordial substance and its manifestations; in *Sankhya* and Yoga, distinguished from *purusha*, the spiritual seer.

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

Rajas — The quality of activity or restlessness; one of the three gunas of *prakriti*.

Restitution — Returning what was taken or making an appropriate repair for an injury or wrongful use.

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

Sattva — The quality of luminosity or clarity; one of the three gunas of *prakriti*.

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

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

Solicitousness — Attentive and considerate care for another person's welfare.

Tamas — The quality of inertia, obscurity or resistance; one of the three *gunas* of *prakriti*.

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.

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-stealing belongs within a wider practice of harmlessness. Its positive direction is responsible participation in a world whose resources are held and used together.

2. 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: The scope of misappropriation includes thought and feeling. The enquiry therefore reaches the motives behind taking credit, extracting attention and treating another person's contribution as our own.

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: The restraints support one another. Truthfulness reveals a taking that self-deception conceals, while nonviolence helps us recognize the injury an unfair advantage can cause.

4. R.N. Iyer, “The Seven Deadly Sins,” *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 345.

“This striving after external goods is insatiable, since it is a pointless persistence in seeking spiritual fulfilment through material means. Thus, avarice inevitably draws the individual into recurrent conflicts with others.”

Meditation thought: Acquisition cannot supply the spiritual sufficiency sought through it. Seeing this misplaced demand can weaken the fear that we must take more in order to become complete.

5. 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: Returning what is borrowed is a concrete exercise in integrity. The resolve becomes dependable when it applies equally to agreeable and disagreeable relationships.

6. 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: What is placed in our care carries a responsibility. The trustee’s attention to unmet needs gives an affirmative purpose to the refusal to appropriate.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Gandhian Trusteeship," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 342.

"He is deeply committed to cultivating his most generous feelings and altruistic hopes for others while consciously and patiently freeing himself from all recognized exploitative attitudes and relationships. He strives to become self-regulating, reliable and sacrificial. But he must become so in a courageous and intelligent way. He must learn to think and feel altruistically. He must learn by degrees the heart's etiquette – to speak, touch and act with the utmost purity and solicitousness. He must become, by virtue of self-training, very attentive to every resource at his disposal – both inner and outer."

Meditation thought: Honesty includes patient freedom from exploitative habits. Careful speech and thoughtful action protect the dignity of people whose resources or trust we are asked to handle.

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

"Two other factors contribute crucially to our becoming authentic trustees – the art of silence and the ability to put trust in others. Silence or 'speech control' is a precondition for all moral and intellectual growth. A trustee must guard his speech if he is to uphold and extend the good. This is not secretiveness but healthy common sense. A trustee's intentions should be as pellucid as crystal and visible to all. But wisdom is needed in all relationships. Hence, a trustee gradually learns not to speak prematurely or out of turn. He fosters a refreshing candour and reserve in speech which enables him to initiate constructive activity in season."

Meditation thought: Speech can preserve or misuse what is entrusted. Discretion and candour belong together when another person's confidence or emerging work requires thoughtful care.

9. R.N. Iyer, "Sadhana Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 281.

"When any object is forcibly confined, it exerts crude pressure against its external constraints. In the ethical realm, effortless self-restraint produces a powerful glow of well-being which others can appreciate and even emulate. When, for example, one is established in *ahimsa*, others do become aware of an encompassing and inclusive love, and latent or overt hostility dissolves around one's radius of benevolence. *Satya*, truth, is the path of least resistance amongst the shifting ratios of the gunas, and when one is clearly established in truth, the predictable consequences of thought, word and deed are constructive and consistent."

Meditation thought: Restraint changes the atmosphere of relationship. Conduct becomes easier to trust when truthfulness and benevolence are stable purposes rather than occasional gestures.

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

"The first of the Theosophical duties is to do one's duty by all men, and especially by those to whom one's specific responsibilities are due, because one has either voluntarily undertaken

them, such as marriage ties, or because one's destiny has allied one to them; I mean those we owe to parents or next of kin."

Meditation thought: Recognizing another person's due includes the obligations we have undertaken. An aspiration towards universal good does not cancel the responsibilities already present.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, "On Self-Sacrifice," p. 138.

"Our duty is to sow seeds broadcast for the future, and see they are good; not to stop to enquire why we should do so, and how and wherefore we are obliged to lose our time, since those who will reap the harvest in days to come will never be ourselves."

Meditation thought: A contribution can be made without claiming its future harvest. This gives the mind a practical alternative to appropriating every benefit that might arise from its work.

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: The passage directs generosity towards the person's actual circumstances. Respect for another's due becomes fuller when honesty is joined to sympathetic understanding and useful assistance.