

Atma Vidya

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Atma Vidya means knowledge of the Self, but this translation becomes meaningful only when the Self is understood in its highest Theosophical sense. It is not knowledge of the personality, biography, temperament or psychological pattern. It is the wisdom of *Atman*, the universal spiritual Self, and the inward science by which the human being learns to distinguish the immortal centre of consciousness from the transient vestures through which it acts.

Within *Gupta Vidya*, Professor Iyer calls *Atma Vidya* its noetic psychology and *Brahma Vidya* its cosmology. Noetic points to the higher intelligence through which consciousness can examine its own assumptions and orientation. *Brahma Vidya* contemplates the cosmic order; *Atma Vidya* considers that same wisdom inwardly, in the constitution and destiny of the human being. The human microcosm is studied in relation to the universal macrocosm. This is a spiritual psychology grounded in metaphysical principles, with a different purpose from describing personality alone.

H.P. Blavatsky gives the decisive safeguard. Among the lesser *Vidyas* there may be knowledge of rites, magical powers, mantras, hidden forces and subtle correspondences. But only *Atma-Vidya*, the true Spiritual and Divine wisdom, can throw final light upon them. Without *Atma-Vidya*, the others remain surface sciences, having length and breadth but no depth. They may produce effects and dazzle the mind, but they lack wisdom unless illumined by knowledge of the Self.

This distinction is vital. The hunger for hidden knowledge can become a refined form of desire. One may want occult laws, psychic impressions or esoteric classifications without becoming less selfish, less proud or more compassionate. *Atma Vidya* asks: what kind of being is seeking knowledge, and to what end? If knowledge does not purify motive and widen compassion, it has not yet become wisdom.

H.P. Blavatsky therefore says in *Studies in Occultism* that *Atma-Vidya*, though translated as “Knowledge of the Soul,” means far more, and is the only kind of occultism the wise and unselfish Theosophist ought to strive after. This does not reject the occult side of Nature. It places it in right order. Lower knowledge may show how hidden forces act; *Atma Vidya* asks how consciousness may become worthy of truth.

The first step in this noetic psychology is to cognize the immanent reality of the immortal soul, the Atma-Buddhic Monad. Professor Iyer explains that the psyche is merely the projected ray of

the divine Monad. Much of what human beings call “myself” belongs to the psyche: impressions, memories, desires, moods, fears, wounds and preferences. These are not unreal in a practical sense, but they are not the Self. The immortal Monad is deeper.

Professor Iyer offers an image of *Atma-Buddhi-Manas* above the head, with a pristine ray of light entering through the brain and descending through the body. He explicitly presents this as a graphic representation of a metaphysical teaching. The image invites contemplation of the imperishable Monad as overbrooding the whole human being; it is not a description of a measurable bodily ray. In its spiritual meaning, the lower nature remains open to illumination even when desire and the restless claims of the personal mind obscure its source.

The human problem is the alienation of *Manas* from *Atma-Buddhi*. Through identification with desire, sensation and the astral vesture, *Manas* becomes beclouded. The individual feels separated from the universal, and embodied consciousness feels cut off from its true estate. *Atma Vidya* begins to heal this exile through inquiry, negation, meditation and self-regeneration.

Every human being must discover true identity by asking, “Who am I?” This question is a sword of discrimination. One must see the falsity of identifying with mask, persona, role, injury, success, failure or personal history. These have karmic meaning, but none of them is the Self. The aim is to realize pure “I-am-I” consciousness beyond separative assertion.

In ordinary life, *Atma Vidya* asks the student to notice where identity is misplaced. Instead of making anger the whole self, one can recognize that anger is present and examine what it is asking the mind to do. Fear and remembered hurt deserve honest attention, while awareness need not surrender its entire horizon to them. This distinction requires tenderness as well as discrimination. To acknowledge a deeper spiritual identity should make us more capable of caring for the embodied person, including the needs and responsibilities of daily life.

Such placing creates compassion. If one sees that one’s own personality is not the Self, one becomes less likely to imprison others in their personalities. The difficult person is not merely the difficulty. The fearful person is not merely the fear. *Atma Vidya* therefore supports Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood. The Self one seeks is not private property; the light that illumines one heart is of the same nature as the light hidden in all. This is knowledge of the Self becoming Heart Doctrine: clearer, warmer, more truthful, and less willing to reduce any being to a passing mask.

Atma Vidya is inseparable from *Ahimsa Yagna*. Professor Iyer teaches that there is no cleavage between Self-knowledge and the practical ideal of helping Nature and working on with her. True Self-knowledge does not produce aloofness from the world. It produces reverent

stewardship. Body, speech, mind, relationship, work and the surrounding atmosphere become entrusted fields.

Imagine receiving a careful criticism of work into which much effort has gone. The personality may hear a verdict on its worth and immediately prepare a defense. Self-inquiry can open a little space: what part of this response concerns the work, and what part concerns my image of myself? Acknowledging an actual error does not diminish the deeper capacity to learn. The correction can be made, the other person thanked and the wounded pride observed without being given command. The occasion becomes a modest exercise in truthful freedom.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes the question of identity from “How am I being seen?” to “What could this situation teach and whom could it help?” The shift does not abolish personal distinction. Different people still bring different gifts, histories and obligations. It releases the demand that these differences establish ultimate separation. Self-knowledge becomes less concerned with securing a favorable portrait and more concerned with making thought and action transparent to a common spiritual ground.

This work develops through continuity. A moment of spacious awareness can be followed by the return of old reactions, and that return is material for further understanding. The student need not pretend to dwell permanently in a state glimpsed only briefly. Regular reflection, patient attention to motive and small acts of disinterested help strengthen the capacity to begin again. One learns to distinguish an inspiring image from an attained realization, and a passing feeling of elevation from a lasting change in character. Such honesty protects aspiration from becoming another mask.

Atma Vidya helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. Lower *Manas* identifies with desire, memory and separative opinion; higher *Manas* reflects the light of *Buddhi*. *Atma Vidya* gives direction to the daily work by which thought, motive and action become more transparent to the Self. Its living image is a pristine ray descending from *Atma-Buddhi-Manas*, slowly illumining the whole nature from within. The ray is welcomed through humility, self-correction and service, so that knowledge becomes character rather than spiritual decoration.

Glossary

Ahimsa Yagna — The sacrifice of nonviolence; Professor Iyer’s expression for the practical ideal of helping Nature and working with her.

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

Atma Vidya — Knowledge of the spiritual Self; Professor Iyer calls it the noetic psychology of *Gupta Vidya*. Also written *Atma-Vidya*.

Atma-Buddhi — The spiritual Self and its vehicle of spiritual intuition, considered together.

Atma-Buddhi-Manas — The higher triad of spiritual Self, spiritual intuition, and higher mind.

Atma-Buddhic Monad — The spiritual Self considered with *Buddhi* as its vehicle; the enduring spiritual ground distinguished from the changing psyche.

Atman — The universal spiritual Self, distinguished from the changing personality.

Bodhisattva — An awakened being devoted to the welfare and liberation of beings; a central ideal of compassionate service.

Brahma Vidya — Divine knowledge or sacred science; the cosmological aspect of *Gupta Vidya*. *Brahm-Vidya* is a related written form.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; Buddhist means pertaining to this higher discernment.

Cerebration — Mental activity or thinking; the passages distinguish habitual personal thinking from a more conscious use of mind.

Cosmology — The study or contemplation of the structure, order and principles of the universe.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — A practice of enlarging the field of thought to include wider relationships, consequences and the welfare of others.

Egoity — Individual self-consciousness or the sense of I; distinguished from egoism as selfish preoccupation.

Esoteric — Inward or hidden in meaning, requiring understanding and preparation beyond outward familiarity.

Gupta Vidya — Sacred or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected Theosophical writings.

Heart Doctrine — The teaching of inward realization joined to compassion, distinguished from a merely external grasp of spiritual forms.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for the welfare of others.

Immanence — Presence within; in the quotations, a spiritual ground understood as present within manifested existence.

Kalachakra — The wheel of time; in the quoted passage, the cyclic order within which the *yogin* acts.

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

Karma — The continuity of action, cause and consequence; karmic law connects moral responsibility with the wider order of life.

Lesser Vidyas — The forms of knowledge concerning rites, magical capacities and powers of sound that Blavatsky contrasts with spiritual Self-knowledge.

Linga Sharira — The subtle or astral form associated with embodied life; also written *linga sarira*.

Macrocosm — The greater universe, contemplated in relation to the human microcosm.

Manas — Mind; the principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice. Manasic means pertaining to this principle.

Metapsychology — In these essays, inquiry into consciousness through spiritual and metaphysical principles; also written meta-psychology.

Microcosm — A smaller expression or reflection of the whole; in Theosophy, the human being in relation to the universe.

Monad — An enduring spiritual unit; in the human context, the spiritual ground of individuality and its evolutionary pilgrimage.

Noetic — Pertaining to higher spiritual intelligence and self-conscious discernment, distinguished from habitual or desire-driven mental activity.

Occultism — The study and disciplined realization of hidden laws of Nature and consciousness; its spiritual purpose is distinguished from the pursuit of powers.

Orientalist — A historical term for a scholar of Asian languages and traditions; used in Blavatsky's account of translations.

Overbrooding — Overshadowing or spiritually illumining from a higher level; the Monad is described as overbrooding embodied consciousness.

Patanjali — The sage associated with the *Yoga Sutras* and their discipline of concentration, meditation and discernment.

Personality — The temporary identity, habits and instruments associated with a particular life, distinguished from enduring spiritual individuality.

Philosophia Perennis — Latin for perennial philosophy; the enduring wisdom shared across spiritual traditions in the cited account.

Planes — Levels or orders of consciousness and substance within the Theosophical account of manifestation.

Psyche — The personal or psychic field of consciousness; described by Professor Iyer as a partial expression of the deeper spiritual Monad.

Psychic — Pertaining to the personal and subtle psychological field, including impressions and desire; not identical with spiritual wisdom.

Sensorium — The collective field or instruments of sensory perception.

Spectator without a spectacle — An image of pure self-conscious awareness without identification with a separate object, role or passing state.

Transcendent — Exceeding a particular level or set of conditions; transcendental points toward a reality beyond ordinary sense experience.

Universal Brotherhood — The spiritual kinship of beings, expressed ethically through care extending beyond personal or sectarian boundaries.

Vesture — A sheath, vehicle or instrument through which consciousness is expressed.

Yogin — A practitioner of yoga; yogins and *yogi* are related forms.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “The Gupta Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 7.

“The central truths of *Gupta Vidya* are not derived from any ancient or modern sect but represent the accumulated wisdom of the ages, the unrecorded inheritance of humanity. Its vast scheme of cosmic and human evolution furnishes all true seekers with the symbolic alphabet necessary to interpret their recurrent visions as well as the universal framework and metaphysical vocabulary, drawn from many mystics and seers, which enable them to communicate their own intuitive perceptions.”

Meditation thought: Read with an open mind and a patient heart, allowing understanding to grow beyond immediate familiarity.

2. R.N. Iyer — “The Gupta Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 7.

“*Gupta Vidya* is an integrated system of fundamental verities taught by initiates and adepts across millennia. It is the *Philosophia Perennis*, the philosophy of human perfectibility, the science of spirituality and the religion of responsibility. It is the primeval fount of myriad religious systems as well as the hidden essence and esoteric wisdom of each.”

Meditation thought: Ask whether spiritual study is making you more responsible in the ordinary circumstances through which character is formed.

3. R.N. Iyer — “The Gupta Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 7.

“Its cosmology is known as *Brahma Vidya* and its noetic psychology is known as *Atma Vidya*. Man, an immortal monad, has been able to preserve this sacred heritage through the sacrificial efforts of enlightened and compassionate individuals, or Bodhisattvas, who constitute an ancient Brotherhood. They quietly assist in the ethical evolution and spiritual development of the whole of humanity.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate self-knowledge within a universal horizon, so that inward attention does not contract into self-occupation.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 62.

“It is as a seer and perceiver that each human being is a truly self-conscious, Manasic being capable of infinite extension of the power of vision from the highest transcendental realms to the most concrete regions of sensuous existence. Therefore, the first step in metapsychology, the effective transcendence of the pairs of opposites, is to cognize the immanent reality of the immortal soul, the Atma-Buddhic Monad.”

Meditation thought: Notice the difference between a passing viewpoint and the capacity to examine it from a wider standpoint.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 62.

“The psyche is merely the projected ray of the divine Monad. As the Monad functions on a plane of space and time removed from that which is customarily apprehended by the psyche, the Monad is only partially incarnated. If it were not incarnated at all, human existence would be impossible.”

Meditation thought: Let changing moods be acknowledged without requiring any one of them to define the whole of your being.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 62.

“One might visualize *Atma-Buddhi-Manas* being above one’s head, with a pristine ray of light — which would be *Buddhi* — entering the head and passing through the brain, through the spinal cord and down to the feet. This would be a graphic way of representing the metaphysical truth that the human being is overbrooded from head to toe by the imperishable Monad.”

Meditation thought: Use the image of the ray as an invitation to contemplation, and let its meaning be tested in gentler conduct.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Consciousness and Form”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, 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: Observe one attachment that clouds judgment; loosening its claim may make the next choice more free.

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

“Every human being must discover his true identity by asking, ‘Who am I?’ He must initially recognize the falsity and absurdity of identifying with any mask or persona. Yet this is precisely the tendency of exteriorized language and lower manasic cerebration. All of this must be thought through and negated.”

Meditation thought: When a role feels threatened, ask what remains capable of learning, correcting and caring beyond that role.

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

“He must seek to realize in daily experience the meditative state which Patanjali calls the condition of the Spectator without a spectacle. To realize this state is to experience pure ‘I-am-I’ consciousness without any reference to being a subject separate from other subjects or any identification with an object in a field of differentiated objects.”

Meditation thought: Allow a moment of quiet awareness without turning it into a claim of attainment or a new image of yourself.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Aquarian Spirituality”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 59.

“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*). To the perfected will of the *yogin* of Time's circle (*Kalachakra*), Nature is the ally, pupil and servant.”

Meditation thought: Join the search for the Self to the care of life; let inward work improve the quality of outward participation.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 169.

“Without the help of *Atma-Vidya*, the other three remain no better than surface sciences, geometrical magnitudes having length and breadth, but no thickness. They are like the soul, limbs, and mind of a sleeping man: capable of mechanical motions, of chaotic dreams and even sleep-walking, of producing visible effects, but stimulated by instinctual not intellectual causes, least of all by fully conscious spiritual impulses.”

Meditation thought: Consider whether a sought capacity would deepen wisdom or merely increase the ability to produce an effect.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — “Occultism versus the Occult Arts”, *Studies in Occultism*, pp. 13–14 (PDF pagination).

“ATMA-VIDYA, a term which is translated simply ‘Knowledge of the Soul,’ true Wisdom by the Orientalists, but which means far more. This last is the only kind of Occultism that any theosophist who admires ‘*Light on the Path*,’ and who would be wise and unselfish, ought to strive after.”

Meditation thought: Let the wish to know become inseparable from the wish to use knowledge unselfishly.