

# Atman

## Definitional Essay

### Theosophy Trust

*Atman* is the universal spiritual Self in Theosophical philosophy, the abiding ground of life behind the changing experiences of particular beings. The word directs attention towards what is most inward while widening the meaning of identity beyond the person. Bodies differ, memories differ, and each life has its own responsibilities; the spiritual essence is common. To study *Atman* is therefore to ask what we mean when we say “I,” and whether our familiar answer includes the deeper life we share with others.

H.P. Blavatsky gives the distinction particular force in *The Key to Theosophy: Atma*, the Higher Self, “is neither your Spirit nor mine, but like sunlight shines on all.” *Atma* and *Atman* are forms used for the same principle. Although listed as the seventh principle in the human constitution, *Atma* is universal Spirit, included in the scheme so that the human being can be understood in relation to the whole. The numbering helps analysis; it does not divide Spirit into separate possessions or confine it within a body.

The ray and sunlight images preserve this relation between universality and individual life. A ray can be considered in relation to what it illumines, while remaining inseparable from its source. Likewise, *Atman* can be spoken of in relation to a human being without becoming that person's exclusive spiritual property. This distinction gives the teaching its ethical reach. Differences in understanding or character concern the expression of spiritual life; they do not entitle anyone to claim a larger share of its universal ground.

Professor Iyer develops the imagery in “The Candle of Vision.” He describes *Atman* as the Spiritual Sun, the eternal witness streaming through the light of *Buddhi*. Elsewhere he speaks of perpetual motion and radiant energy. These expressions belong to a metaphysical account of living Spirit. They ask the student to conceive an abiding reality that is inexhaustibly alive. Their meaning cannot be settled by equating spiritual light with visible radiation, or by locating a miniature sun somewhere inside the human frame.

The witness image also needs care. We can notice that a mood changes while the capacity to be aware of it remains, but this observation alone does not establish realization of *Atman*. It offers a modest beginning in distinguishing awareness from its passing contents. A grievance may occupy the mind so fully that it seems to tell the whole truth about us. Remembering that it is one experience within a larger life can loosen its authority and leave room for a more deliberate response.

Within the higher human triad, *Buddhi* is the spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman*, and *Manas* is self-conscious mind. Through their relation, universal Spirit can be reflected in discernment and consciously expressed in thought. The distinctions matter because the spiritual Self is not simply the best opinion we currently hold about ourselves. An insight must still be examined, understood and lived. The teaching places a responsibility upon the human instrument to become more receptive, while keeping the source of its light beyond personal manufacture.

This explains Blavatsky's statement in *The Secret Doctrine* that *Atma* neither progresses, forgets nor remembers. Development belongs to the vehicles and their conscious relation to Spirit. *Atman* does not become more universal when a person learns something. What changes is the capacity to receive and express that universality. The distinction also qualifies the language of immortality. The deathlessness of Spirit does not mean that a particular personality, with all its habits and opinions, continues unchanged merely because it has a spiritual root.

In "Atma Vidya," Professor Iyer presents the discipline of *neti, neti*, conventionally rendered "not this, not this." Its purpose is to withdraw final identification from the body, preferences and passing thoughts. Such negation can be approached thoughtfully: this feeling is present, but it need not decide the whole of my action. The practice asks for calm awareness. It should deepen freedom to fulfil life's responsibilities, including care for the body, rather than become a reason to neglect the conditions through which learning takes place.

Gratitude supplies another safeguard. Professor Iyer connects knowledge of *Atman* and its unity with *Brahman* to reverence for predecessors and preceptors. Our capacity to study has been supported by teachers, translators and lives of patient service. Remembering this inheritance corrects the fantasy of solitary spiritual self-sufficiency. Reverence can coexist with discrimination: we may acknowledge what another person has made possible while continuing to examine the teaching carefully. The student learns to receive without turning either the teacher or the student's own judgment into an unquestionable possession.

Human Solidarity follows from the universal meaning of Self. Another person's present confusion cannot exhaust what that being is. We may need to challenge harmful conduct, repair damage or establish a boundary, while retaining respect for the spiritual possibility beneath it. This is demanding in ordinary relationships. It asks us to address a mistake without reducing its author to that mistake, and to offer help without requiring agreement with our philosophy. Shared dignity becomes credible through how we speak and act when differences are real.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception begins by questioning whose experience our account of life leaves out. A decision may look satisfactory from the standpoint of our own convenience while imposing burdens on people we scarcely notice. Contemplating a universal Self gives us a reason to look again. We can seek the view of someone affected, acknowledge an overlooked

need, or change an arrangement that benefits us unfairly. The larger circle takes shape through these acts of attention, each bringing another life into practical consideration.

Professor Iyer's "Spirit, Mind and Matter" extends this kinship throughout Nature. Humanity and other forms of life arise within a common spiritual and substantial order. The human capacity for self-conscious choice consequently brings responsibility towards the beings and conditions that sustain us. A garden, an animal, or a shared place offers a field for learning that responsibility. Care requires observation of actual needs. Respect for universal life becomes more substantial when it changes the treatment of a particular living thing.

Meditation can return the mind to this wider ground without demanding a dramatic experience. One may contemplate the sunlight image, notice the impulse to make everything refer back to oneself, and let that impulse settle. Afterwards comes the useful question of how to carry the recollection into the day. Professor Iyer emphasizes regularity and persistence over the amount of progress claimed. A brief, sincere effort followed by more attentive conduct gives the teaching somewhere to live, even while its full metaphysical meaning remains difficult. If an interruption arrives, it can become part of the practice: the person seeking our attention also belongs within the universal life we have been contemplating. We can respond thoughtfully while preserving whatever practical limits the situation requires.

*Atman* leaves us with a spacious understanding of identity and an exacting invitation to care. We need not pretend that personalities have ceased to matter; through them we learn, keep promises and respond to one another. We can remember that they express a life greater than their present limits. The universal Self is approached with humility, and its ethical significance can be practised now. What we cannot possess as private spiritual wealth may become a reason to meet the world with greater patience and a more generous attention.

## Glossary

**Atma / Atman** — Universal Spirit or Self, the seventh human principle; its universality prevents it from becoming an individual possession.

**Atma Vidya** — Knowledge of the Self; in Professor Iyer's exposition, a discipline of meditation, self-study, gratitude and service.

**Atma-Buddhi** — The spiritual duad or Monad: universal Spirit and its spiritual vehicle.

**Atma-Buddhi-Manas** — The higher triad of universal Spirit, spiritual soul and higher self-conscious mind.

**Brahman** — Universal spiritual Reality, identified with *Atman* in non-dual teaching; distinguish it from *Brahma*, the creative deity.

**Buddhi** — Spiritual soul and vehicle of *Atman*, through which mind may receive illumination.

**Human Solidarity** — The common dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

**Individuality** — The enduring spiritual identity distinguished from the temporary personality of one embodied life.

**Mahabuddhi** — Great or universal *Buddhi*; a name associated with *Mahat* and the cosmic ground of spiritual intelligence.

**Mahat** — Cosmic intelligence or Universal Mind, from which the human principle of *Manas* derives.

**Manas** — The self-conscious thinking principle; in its higher aspect, the enduring human thinker capable of reflecting *Buddhi*.

**Meta-Spirit** — A term for the universal spiritual ground beyond particular manifestations, used in Blavatsky's explanation of *Atma*.

**Metaphysical** — Concerning fundamental principles of reality and being, beyond a description limited to sensory phenomena.

**Monad** — The indivisible spiritual life commonly described in the human constitution as *Atma-Buddhi*.

**Neti, neti** — “Not this, not this”: the contemplative withdrawal of final identification from particular objects, states and thoughts.

**Personality** — The temporary complex of character, memories and embodied capacities through which an individual acts in one life.

**Preceptor** — A teacher or guide whose instruction supports the student's spiritual and intellectual development.

**Sanctum sanctorum** — Latin for the holy of holies or innermost sanctuary; used as an image of the spiritual heart.

**Septenary constitution** — The sevenfold account of human principles, used to distinguish their functions and relations.

**Shankaracharya** — The Indian teacher associated with *Advaita Vedanta*, the philosophy of non-duality.

**Spiritual Sun** — An image of *Atman* as the universal source of spiritual light and the eternal witness; a metaphysical symbol.

## Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 44, “Atmâ (or Atman)”.

“The Universal Spirit, the divine Monad, the 7th Principle, so-called, in the septenary constitution of man. The Supreme Soul.”

*Meditation thought:* Hold universality at the centre of the definition. The highest Self gives a common ground to lives that appear separate.

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 76.

“*Atma*, the ‘Higher Self,’ is neither your Spirit nor mine, but like sunlight shines on all. It is the universally diffused ‘divine principle,’ and is inseparable from its one and absolute Meta-Spirit, as the sunbeam is inseparable from sunlight.”

*Meditation thought:* Let the sunlight image loosen the wish to possess spiritual life. What does equal reverence ask of you today?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Spirit, Mind and Matter”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 140.

“All humanity and all Nature are sprung from the same root substance. That substance is not blind and inert but refulgent with intelligence, suffused with the divine radiant energy of the *Atman*.”

*Meditation thought:* Include Nature when contemplating shared origin. Let one ordinary act of care reflect that wider kinship.

4. R.N. Iyer — “The Candle of Vision”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 158.

“The Spiritual Sun in every man, the *Atman*, is the eternal witness, unconditioned and free, independent of any thing or being and self-sustaining, streaming forth through the light of *Buddhi*.”

*Meditation thought:* Distinguish the abiding witness from the changing contents of experience. Consider how spiritual discernment may give that distinction practical expression.

5. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 244.

“*Atma* neither progresses, forgets, nor remembers. It does not belong to this plane: it is but the ray of light eternal which shines upon and through the darkness of matter—when the latter is willing.”

*Meditation thought:* Where might a fixed opinion limit your receptivity to spiritual light?

6. R.N. Iyer — “Nirvana and Samsara”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 420.

“*Atman* is above the body, and the *Atman* is below the body.”

*Meditation thought:* Read above and below as a challenge to confining Spirit within a bodily location. The symbol points towards a presence that exceeds the form.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 64.

“Each genuine effort towards meditation undertaken in a spirit of devotion and sacrificial service can aid in the discovery of the *sanctum sanctorum* in the temple of the human form, hidden in the depths of the spiritual heart.”

*Meditation thought:* Bring a purpose of service into reflection. Let the quiet interval prepare you to return to someone or something with greater care.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 65.

“In this effort to reverse the polarity of the mind, changing it from involvement with concrete manifest particulars to immersion in the unmanifest universal *Atman*, the attention should not cling to the content of particular thoughts. All thoughts are relative.”

*Meditation thought:* Notice a thought without making it your final identity. Let that freedom prepare a considered response.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 63.

“As Shankaracharya explicitly states, there can be no realization of the *Atman* and its unity with *Brahman* apart from a reverential and grateful recognition of predecessors and preceptors.”

*Meditation thought:* Remember those whose patient work made your present understanding possible. Gratitude can deepen study without requiring the surrender of judgment.

10. R.N. Iyer — “As Above, So Below”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 174.

“*Atman* is an unconditionally universal essence, while *Buddhi* is connected with *Mahabuddhi* and *Manas* derives from *Mahat*.”

*Meditation thought:* Contemplate the three principles as distinct functions within a common spiritual life.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 67.

“The amount of progress made is much less important than the regularity and persistence of the effort.”

*Meditation thought:* Choose a modest practice that can be sustained. Let its value appear in the quality of your attention and conduct.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Nirvana and Samsara”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 420.

“Where one cannot understand, one must be as patient as the mountains and the rocks, waiting to learn the meaning of a particular moment or event, even if it takes all one’s life.”

*Meditation thought:* Leave room for a meaning you cannot yet see, while responding compassionately to present needs.