

# Bhava

## Definitional Essay

### Theosophy Trust

*Bhava* means becoming or conditioned existence. In the usual twelvefold sequence of dependent origination it is the tenth link, sustained by *Upadana*, clinging, and conditioning *Jati*, birth. Its concern is the causal process through which a mode of existence is maintained and renewed. The spelling in this use is *Bhava*; the Sanskrit word *Bhāva*, often used for an inward state or disposition, has related but wider applications. The governing question here is what gives continued becoming its momentum.

H.P. Blavatsky gives the compact definition in *The Theosophical Glossary*: *Bhava* is “Being, or state of being; the world, a birth.” In the *Nidana* entry, she describes *Bhava* as the karmic agent leading each new sentient being into one or another mode of existence. Though her enumeration differs from the standard order used in this series, her insight is exact. *Bhava* is not vague existence. It is karmically active becoming.

This is why *Upadana* is called the creative cause of *Bhava*. Grasping creates becoming. What consciousness appropriates becomes material for a state of being. If one grasps pleasure, one begins to become around repetition. If one grasps pain, one begins to become around wound. If one grasps identity, one becomes a defender of that identity. *Bhava* is the shaping power of clinging.

*The Secret Doctrine* gives the larger law. The *Nidanas* are causes of being, each link both effect and cause within a stream of catenated law that brings Karma into full sway. *Bhava* must therefore be understood lawfully. It is the causal maturity of previous tendencies and the causal preparation for future birth. It is both result and seed.

The sequence places becoming between clinging and birth. It therefore concerns more than a passing mood or an ordinary change of occupation. In Buddhist teaching it belongs to the account of continued existence and rebirth. Repeated daily choices provide a useful analogy for its causal character: what is nourished acquires momentum. Such examples illuminate the principle without replacing the technical doctrine with a theory of habits.

The word “becoming” must not be confused with pure Being. *The Gupta Vidya* glossaries define *samsara* as conditionality, the realm of becoming in contrast to Being, birth and death, conditioned existence, and illusion. *Bhava* belongs to the realm where states arise, persist, decay, and generate further states. *Sat*, by contrast, is Be-ness, the ever-present Reality.

*Bhava* as this link belongs to samsaric becoming, sustained by ignorance and clinging. Ethical development should not simply be relabeled a purified version of the same bondage. It can, however, change the conditions that sustain bondage. The student lives and acts within a changing world while cultivating understanding, generosity and detachment. These activities matter because the causes of experience are not beyond all possibility of transformation.

Professor Iyer's teaching on the Buddha gives the wider ethical frame. Buddha pointed to the interconnectedness of everything, the root causes of embodied existence, and the Chain of Dependent Origination. He emphasized the law-governed nature of the cosmos so that human beings might assume moral responsibility. *Bhava* is one of those lawful conditions, a becoming rooted in causes.

*Bhava* is also the link where the illusion of self-sufficiency becomes strong. Professor Iyer's "Dhyana Marga" warns that clinging to forms and to the realm of sensations hardens the lower mind. He also points to the falsity of the notion that anything is disconnected from the entire chain. Becoming is never private. What one becomes affects the field.

The false self wants to believe that its becoming belongs only to itself. Dependent origination denies this. No state is self-produced or self-contained. Each condition arises through causes and becomes a cause. The hardening of one mind adds hardness to the common atmosphere; the softening of one heart adds possibility to the whole. In this sense, *Bhava* deepens Human Solidarity.

The section "The Diamond Sutra" in *The Gupta Vidya* offers a corrective from the standpoint of voidness. Its discussion denies independent coming-into-existence or passing-away at the ultimate level. Such language does not make ordinary consequences disappear. It questions the assumption that the processes we name possess self-sufficient being. Becoming can therefore be consequential without being absolute.

This protects the student from two errors. The first is fatalism: "I am what I am becoming, and nothing can interrupt it." The second is denial: "There is no becoming, so conduct does not matter." The middle way is exact. Becoming is empty of inherent existence, but karma functions. States are not absolute, but they have consequences.

Professor Iyer's "Noetic Self-Determination" gives a practical test. If one is becoming more wilful, assertive, parasitic, and caught in lower psychic action, one is moving toward bondage. If one is becoming humbler, more responsive, more non-violent, more open to the relative reality of others, one is apprenticed to renunciation and benevolent magic. *Bhava* can be diagnosed by the direction of character.

In ordinary relationships, *Bhava* is constantly being made. A person who repeatedly speaks from irritation becomes someone others fear to approach. A person who repeatedly gives attention with sincerity becomes trustworthy. A person who repeatedly refuses to listen becomes enclosed. These are modes of being formed by causes.

A recurring family task offers a modest example. If one person always quietly repairs what everyone else neglects, resentment and dependence may grow together. Discussing the task and sharing it differently changes more than the timetable. It changes expectations about who must carry the burden. The example shows why becoming cannot be understood solely inside an isolated mind: our patterns take shape among other people, and their revision may require practical arrangements as well as inward resolve.

*Bhava* also means transformation is real. Because becoming is causal, new causes can be introduced. The reactive person can practice pause. The grasping person can practice gratitude. The self-protective person can practice trust. The bitter person can bless. The scattered person can meditate. Repeated causes become tendencies, and tendencies become states.

In “The Eye of Shiva,” Professor Iyer describes humanity as coming of age. This is a wider application of becoming, concerned with collective responsibility. Families, communities and institutions acquire directions through repeated choices. Asking what we are becoming together brings the social consequences of personal habits into view, without confusing a historical analogy with the technical Buddhist link.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception makes that inquiry practical. A group may repeatedly excuse small evasions until candour becomes difficult. One member’s willingness to admit a mistake can introduce another possibility. The outcome is not guaranteed, but a new cause has entered the shared conditions. Attention turns from defending an established character toward making more truthful participation possible.

The deeper compassion of this doctrine is that every being is in process. No person is merely the present appearance. Each is a stream of causes, wounds, efforts, delusions, aspirations, and latent possibilities. This does not excuse harm, but it prevents contempt. It supports firm compassion.

Universal Brotherhood is the highest horizon of transformed *Bhava*. Separative becoming says, “I become for myself.” Brotherhood says, “I become in relation to all.” One no longer asks only, “What will I become?” but “What kind of becoming do I help make possible in others?”

The teaching brings the future into the care of the present. It does not ask us to predict the whole course of another life, nor to measure our own destiny from a passing mood. It asks us to notice what is being sustained and to respond with greater understanding. A habit need not be

enthroned as identity. Conditions can be changed, and each honest change may widen the possibilities available to others as well as to ourselves.

## Glossary

**Absolute** — Unconditioned reality, beyond the limits and relations of manifested existence.

**Astral** — Pertaining to the subtle formative or psychic dimension described in Theosophical teaching.

**Be-ness** — A Theosophical expression for unconditioned reality, distinguished from particular forms of being or becoming.

**Becoming** — Conditioned arising and continuation; *Bhava* is its particular use within dependent origination.

**Bhava** — Conditioned becoming or existence; the tenth link in dependent origination, between clinging and birth. Distinguish *Bhāva*, a related Sanskrit term for a state or disposition.

**Buddha** — An awakened one; in these essays, chiefly Gautama Buddha as teacher of the path beyond suffering.

**Catenated** — Linked in a connected series; used of the causal relations among the *Nidanas*.

**Conditioned** — Dependent upon causes, circumstances, limits or relations; contrasted with the unconditioned.

**Dependent Origination** — The Buddhist teaching that conditioned existence and suffering arise through interdependent causes; the Twelve *Nidanas* give a standard twelvefold exposition.

**Dhyana** — Meditation or contemplative absorption; Professor Iyer relates philosophic insight to its depth.

**Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception** — Widening understanding to include relationships, circumstances and responsibilities omitted by an isolated personal view.

**Ego** — A centre of self-reference; Theosophy distinguishes the enduring spiritual individuality from the temporary personal ego.

**Gati** — A course or state of existence; *Gāti* is the spelling in the cited Glossary passage.

**Gupta Vidya** — Secret or esoteric wisdom; also the title of the collected essays of Professor Raghavan N. Iyer.

**Hinayana** — A historical and contested designation for Buddhist teachings seeking liberation; spelled *Hīnayāna* in the quotation. Its appearance preserves the source's terminology.

**Human Solidarity** — Recognition of shared human dignity, vulnerability and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility.

**Jati** — Birth; the eleventh link in dependent origination. *Jāti* and *Jāti* are alternative spellings.

**Karma** — The law of ethical causation and adjustment; actions and motives bear consequences within a wider order.

**Nidana** — A causal link or condition; the Twelve *Nidanas* describe the arising of conditioned existence. *Nidāna* is a historical spelling.

**Nirvana** — Liberation from the bondage sustained by ignorance and craving; *Nirvāna* is an older spelling.

**Noetic** — Pertaining to higher spiritual intelligence, distinguished in these sources from merely personal or psychic reaction.

**Personality** — The temporary personal constitution, memories and roles of one life, distinguished from the enduring individuality in Theosophy.

**Psychic** — Pertaining to personal or subtle awareness shaped by impressions and desire; not by itself equivalent to spiritual wisdom.

**Samsara** — Conditioned cyclic existence; the field of birth and death sustained by ignorance and craving.

**Samvritisatya** — Conventional or relative truth; the passage discusses the limitations and possible errors of separative perception.

**Sanskrit** — The classical Indian language from which many Theosophical technical terms are drawn.

**Sat** — Reality, truth or Be-ness; contrasted with conditioned becoming in the metaphysical discussion.

**Sentient** — Capable of experience or feeling.

**Siva** — A major Hindu divine figure associated with dissolution and regeneration; also written Shiva.

**Trailokya** — The three worlds or spheres of conditioned existence in the traditional cosmological account.

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

**Upadana** — Clinging or appropriation; the ninth link in dependent origination. *Upādāna* and *Upādāna* are alternative spellings. Material cause is a distinct philosophical use.

**Voidness** — Absence of independent self-existence; a metaphysical and contemplative teaching, not a synonym for mere nothingness.

## Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, “Bhava”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 58.

“*Bhava* (Sk.). Being, or state of being; the world, a birth, and also a name of *Siva*.”

*Meditation thought:* The word has several uses, including a divine name. The present essay concerns conditioned becoming in dependent origination, rather than treating all those meanings as interchangeable.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, “Nidâna”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, pp. 231–232.

“*Bhava*, the Karmic agent which leads every new sentient being to be born in this or another mode of existence in the *Trailokya* and *Gâti*.”

*Meditation thought:* *Bhava* is presented as active in the conditions of birth. The designation concerns causal process, not a separate agent standing outside the chain.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, “Nidâna”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 232.

“*Upâdâna*, the creative cause of *Bhava* which thus becomes the cause of *Jati* which is the effect; and this creative cause is the clinging to life.”

*Meditation thought:* Clinging and becoming are explicitly related. Consider what is being sustained when an identity must continually be defended.

4. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 39.

“The twelve *Nidanas* or causes of being. Each is the effect of its antecedent cause, and a cause, in its turn, to its successor ; the sum total of the *Nidanas* being based on the four truths, a doctrine especially characteristic of the *Hînayâna* System. They belong to the theory of the stream of catenated law which produces merit and demerit, and finally brings Karma into full sway.”

*Meditation thought:* Each link receives and transmits consequences. The future is not isolated from the causes being introduced through present conduct.

5. R.N. Iyer, “The Message of Buddha”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 225.

“Buddha not only proclaimed the existence of One Life Principle but also pointed to the interconnectedness of everything, the root causes of embodied existence, and the Chain of Dependent Origination. Any particular position or condition in space and time must be viewed as a part in relation to the whole, and not in terms of the illusory ego or the separative self. The latter is a projection in a particular situation, from which complete knowledge cannot

be gained, and from which all such relative perceptions contain within themselves the elements of error and delusion, *samvritisatya*."

*Meditation thought:* Professor Iyer interprets the Buddha's teaching through universal unity and moral responsibility. The passage asks that a condition be understood in relation to the wider whole.

6. R.N. Iyer, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 496.

"*samsara* Conditionality, as contrasted with nirvana; realm of becoming, in contrast to Being."

*Meditation thought:* The glossary distinguishes conditioned becoming from unconditioned Being. This contrast concerns levels of philosophical analysis, not a denial of the consequences experienced in daily life.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Dhyana Marga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 385.

"Clinging to the realm of sensations is at the root of the hardness and impermeability of the lower mind. Once one begins to understand how much pain obscurity of the mind produces within and without, one can bring a greater honesty and maturity, a greater intensity, to the task of self-purification."

*Meditation thought:* The hardening of mind is connected with clinging. Greater honesty can begin when concern for an image of progress gives way to the actual work of self-purification.

8. R.N. Iyer, "The Diamond Sutra", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 128.

"Similarly, it would be a mistake for us to become concerned about our present incarnation in relation to past and future lives. It is no doubt useful to reflect upon the workings of Karma in relation to our present or any other personality, but we must gain the 'higher carelessness' that is based upon the awareness that 'there is no passing away nor coming into existence.' Again, we must not become self-conscious about helping in the liberation of all beings, for this thought is itself illusory in so far as it fails to take note of the fact that the notions of being and of liberation are purely relative."

*Meditation thought:* The denial of independent coming and going belongs to an ultimate perspective. The same passage calls for responsibility, preventing that perspective from becoming indifference to conduct.

9. R.N. Iyer, "Noetic Self-Determination", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 273.

"This suggests a practical test in one's self-study. If one is becoming more wilful, one is becoming more and more caught up in lower psychic action. One's astral body is becoming inflamed, fattened and polluted, and one is losing one's flickering connection with the divine and silent Spectator. This is a poor way of living and ageing, a pathetic condition."

*Meditation thought:* The test is the direction of one's character, not the grandeur of one's claims. Examine a repeated response that is making sincere relationship more difficult.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Noetic Self-Determination", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, pp. 273–274.

"If, on the other hand, one is becoming humbler and more responsive to others, more non-violent, less assertive and more open to entering into the relative reality of other beings, loosening and letting go the sense of separateness, one is becoming a true apprentice upon the path of renunciation, the path of benevolent magic."

*Meditation thought:* Humility and responsiveness indicate another direction of growth. A willingness to enter another person's relative reality makes self-study less enclosed.

11. R.N. Iyer, "The Eye of Shiva", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 209.

"In the infancy of humanity, when all alike were secure in their joyous awareness of immortality, birth and death were viewed as no more strange than the putting on or taking off of a garment. In general, the human race has passed on from childlike wonder to adolescent bewilderment and into the self-questioning of youth amidst a burgeoning of the fires of creativity around the time of its puberty. Now, despite half-hidden and half-denied memories of old errors, it is possible for humanity to get ready for the next stage, which is the maturation of adulthood. Humanity is coming of age, becoming adult."

*Meditation thought:* Humanity's coming of age is a collective image. Reflect on which practices help a community assume more mature responsibility for the lives within its care.

12. R.N. Iyer, "The Fire of Purgation", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 355.

"To become part of the solution and not of the problem, to join the future instead of clinging to the past, each must begin by shaving off pretensions and cutting away the obscurations hitherto entertained through ignorance. By becoming natural, straightforward and simple, individuals can enjoy developing a taste for meditation upon pure, unbounded and eternal consciousness."

*Meditation thought:* The future becomes approachable through the removal of pretension. A straightforward admission can begin a more useful participation than an elaborate defence of an established image.