

Chitta

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

The mind receives more than it knows how to understand. An encounter leaves an impression; a remembered pleasure draws attention away from the present; a conviction quietly determines what will count as evidence. *Chitta* is the field in which these movements take place. In Professor Iyer's interpretation of Patanjali, the word embraces the operative life of mental consciousness, including perception, imagination, memory, and the inward effects of experience. To study *chitta* is to ask how this changing field can become clear enough to serve spiritual understanding.

The translation "mind" is useful provided we do not reduce it to reasoning alone. Professor Iyer explains that yoga gathers under *chitta* functions which *Sankhya* distinguishes as intellect, egoity, mind, and the powers of sensation and action. This makes *chitta* a comprehensive term within a particular philosophical system. It should not be equated mechanically with every use of *Manas* in Theosophy. *Manas* names the principle of self-conscious thought; *chitta*, here, describes the wider mental field through which experience is registered and organized.

An equally important distinction separates *chitta* from *purusha*, the Seer. *Chitta* belongs to *prakriti*, the changing order of Nature. It receives forms, undergoes modification, and bears impressions. *Purusha* is the spiritual source of knowing, whose light the mind reflects. The distinction remains necessary even when *chitta* becomes exceptionally refined. A lucid instrument has not thereby become the source of its illumination. The teaching invites us to honor the mind's possibilities while understanding the limits of its borrowed light.

Professor Iyer also distinguishes an object's existence from the way a particular mind apprehends it. The object is not created simply by our opinion, although our knowledge of it is mind-dependent. This guards against treating mental discipline as a license to deny inconvenient facts. A clearer mind remains answerable to what it encounters. The spiritual inquiry concerns the conditions and source of knowing, while daily responsibility requires careful observation, reliable evidence, and the willingness to revise a mistaken interpretation. Inner refinement should make that willingness stronger.

Patanjali places the restraint of mental modifications at the beginning of yoga. In the "Samadhi Pada" essay, Professor Iyer explains that *chitta*'s true nature becomes knowable when external influences and their inward impresses no longer continually modify it. Ordinarily, a movement is experienced and then appropriated. Instead of recognizing a fear as an event in consciousness, the person begins to see the whole world through that fear. Identification gives a passing condition authority over perception, choice, and relationship.

The five classes of modification are correct cognition, misconception, fantasy, sleep, and memory. Their inclusion shows the reach of the discipline. The problem exceeds mistaken opinions. Accurate knowledge can remain bound to pride; a remembered kindness can become a demand for repayment; an attractive image can occupy the mind long after its usefulness has passed. Correct cognition has an indispensable practical place, yet it cannot by itself accomplish the spiritual freedom for which yoga prepares the aspirant.

Sleep makes another distinction plain. The disappearance of ordinary thoughts does not establish self-knowledge. Professor Iyer insists that involuntary withdrawal into unconsciousness leaves the underlying bondage intact. Yogic stillness therefore requires alertness. A mind made dull, exhausted, or forcibly empty would lack the very capacity the discipline seeks to awaken. The aspiration is a sustained lucidity in which mental movement can be understood without the immediate compulsion to follow it.

Abhyasa and *vairagya* guide this training. *Abhyasa* is the continuing effort to abide in steadiness. *Vairagya* is detachment joined to a clear recognition of the relative value of things. Practice helps attention return; detachment loosens the claim made by whatever has attracted it. Their cooperation matters. Effort alone may become anxious control, while a professed detachment without effort may leave the old habits untouched. A patient return to the chosen work gives both qualities a practical expression.

The image of the guarded lamp, drawn from *The Voice of the Silence*, offers a way to contemplate this relation. A flame exposed to every current of air flickers, throwing uncertain shadows. A sheltered flame illuminates what stands before it. The shelter suggests an ordering of life that supports attention: restraint in speech, care in motive, and fidelity to a worthy object of thought. The image points toward a condition of knowing; it does not ask us to withdraw our concern from the world.

Chitta also carries tendencies which are less visible than its immediate movements. In “*Kaivalya Pada*,” Professor Iyer describes *vasana* as finding support in the mutable mind. A recurring reaction may thus express more than the present occasion. What seems spontaneous can be shaped by a long history of desire and identification. Understanding this depth gives patience a rational basis. The return of a tendency calls for renewed discernment, rather than a dramatic conclusion that all previous effort has failed.

Consider a conversation in which we expect criticism. Before the other person finishes, an inward reply is already forming. *Chitta* has supplied a remembered pattern and begun to fit the present speaker into it. A small act of attention changes the encounter: we let the sentence finish, distinguish what was said from what we anticipated, and ask for clarification where needed.

The spiritual principle is approached through a concrete discipline of reception. Another person is given the chance to be heard accurately.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception begins here by including what our first reaction excluded. Perhaps the speaker is tired, attempting a difficult kindness, or describing a problem we have not yet understood. None of these possibilities must be assumed true. Their value is to reopen inquiry. *Manas* becomes more serviceable to *Buddhi* when it can examine an impression without defending it as a possession. Greater spaciousness then supports greater exactness, because there is less pressure to make the evidence obey a private story.

This inward work bears directly on Human Solidarity. Other people must live with the consequences of our interpretations. A careless suspicion may become an accusation; an unexamined resentment may shape a household or a shared undertaking. A clearer *chitta* makes room for correction before such consequences multiply. The common struggle with mental conditioning can also deepen compassion. We remain responsible for what we do, while learning to distinguish a person's enduring possibilities from a temporary pattern of thought or feeling.

The mind's refinement should not be confused with the manufacture of a superior personal identity. *Chitta* can appropriate the idea of being calm as readily as it appropriates an insult. Then the desire to appear spiritual becomes another disturbance. Self-study asks whether attention is becoming more honest and whether conduct is becoming more considerate. These modest questions protect practice from display. They allow quiet progress to be recognized through its usefulness, without turning the observer into the center of every observation.

At the far horizon of the teaching, *chitta* becomes so transparent that the Seer is no longer confused with its instruments. This is a profound realization, not a title to claim after a peaceful interval. Its direction can nevertheless inform the day before us. We can receive an impression, examine its claim, and choose the response that serves truth and another's welfare. The lamp is tended through such fidelity. As its light steadies, the space it illuminates becomes more hospitable to all who enter.

Glossary

Abhyasa — Steady, repeated practice; the effort to maintain a chosen state of attention.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; in yoga, the refined cognitive instrument.

Chitta — The mind-field, whose modifications are examined in Patanjali's yoga.

Chitta-vritti-nirodha — Restraint of mental modifications, Patanjali's definition of yoga.

Chittavritti — A modification or movement of the mind-field; *chittavrittis* is the plural.

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

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

Maya — Illusion or conditioned appearance; the tendency to take the relative as final reality.

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

Prashantavahita — Tranquil continuity of mind, fully awake and without fluctuations.

Purusha — The Seer or spiritual source of knowing, distinguished from *Prakriti*.

Qua — Latin for as or in the capacity of; used in the source to emphasize *Purusha* as *Purusha*.

Sankhya — An Indian philosophical system distinguishing *Purusha*, the Seer, from *Prakriti*, the field of Nature.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Vasana — Latent craving or a trace of unfulfilled longing; *vasanas* is the plural.

Yogabhashya — The traditional commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 269.

"Patanjali set down his most famous words: '*yogash chitta-vritti-nirodhah*', 'Yoga is the restraint of the modifications of the mind.' He stated the essential meaning of yoga without any argument or illustration, as if he were providing a basic axiom."

Meditation thought: Begin with the mind as a field of practice. Let a clear idea guide a real act of attention, without mistaking the idea for the completed discipline.

2. R.N. Iyer — "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 270.

"For Patanjali, the true nature of *chitta*, the mind, can be known only when it is not modified by external influences and their internal impresses."

Meditation thought: Consider how an impression changes what seems visible. Can attention remain present without immediately accepting the impression's interpretation?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 270.

“For as long as modifications persist without being deliberately chosen for a purpose, the mind unwittingly identifies with them, falling into passivity, habitude, and the pain which results from a state of fragmentation and self-alienation.”

Meditation thought: Observe the point at which a passing movement becomes a claim about who you are. Let recognition interrupt the automatic identification.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, pp. 270–271.

“The five types of mental modifications are: correct cognition, based on direct perception, valid inference and verbal testimony; misconception, based upon something other than itself, namely the five *kleshas* or sources of sorrow – ignorance, egoism, attachment, hate and the fear of death, according to the *Yogabhashya*; fantasy, engendered by words and concepts, when and to the degree that they do not refer to reality; sleep, which occurs when other modifications cease and the mind is emptied of mental contents; and memory, which is the result of clinging to, or at least not letting go of, objects or images of subjective experiences.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish the kinds of mental activity in an ordinary experience. Their differences help the mind become more exact about its own operations.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 271.

“Given this delusive condition, the mere temporary cessation of modifications, such as occurs in sleep, will not help to liberate man’s immortal spirit. As *maya* is pervasive illusion, humanity as it knows itself is a part of it. Ignorant or involuntary withdrawal from its action only makes it unconscious, and this is why sleep is classed as one of the *chittavrittis*.”

Meditation thought: Keep sleep and spiritual wakefulness distinct. A temporary absence of thought does not establish freedom from the conditions that produced it.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 271.

“Patanjali taught that deliverance can only come through *abhyasa*, assiduous practice, and *vairagya*, dispassionate detachment. *Abhyasa* is the active opposite of passive sleep, and *vairagya* frees one from all attachments, including the *kleshas*, which induce misconceptions.”

Meditation thought: Join the willingness to return with the willingness to release. Steady attention needs both effort and freedom from attachment.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 272.

“For Patanjali, however, *abhyasa* is not just striving to do something; it is rather the effort to be something. ‘*Abhyasa* is the continuous effort to abide in a steady state.’ According to the *Yogabhashya*, *abhyasa* is the attempt to preserve *prashantavahita*, continuity of mind or consciousness which is both fully awake and without fluctuations.”

Meditation thought: Let continuity be the aim of a modest practice. A quiet return can express greater steadiness than an impatient demand for perfect concentration.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 296.

“*Vasana* finds its support in the mutable mind, which is the action of *prakriti* owing to the proximity of *purusha*. Only when the mind is fully awake, wholly focussed and serenely steadfast will *vasana* vanish. This is equivalent to the potential ability of *prakriti* to behold *purusha qua purusha* without wavering, and this is only possible as a deliberate act – *buddhi* reflecting *purusha* without distortion or fluctuation.”

Meditation thought: Give hidden tendencies time to become visible. Study the supporting conditions in the mutable mind without claiming that one insight has ended them.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 297.

“*Purusha*, however, cannot be a mental object. Rather, it is seen directly when the mind remains focussed upon it and does not move.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish an imagined object called the Self from the spiritual source of knowing. Let the distinction keep contemplation reverent and exact.

10. R.N. Iyer — “The Mahamudra of Voidness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, pp. 394–395.

“The cloudlessness signifies an absence of obstruction and confusion of the cognitive nature of the mind, but also a total suffusion of the mind by the overarching, refulgent light of the sun.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate clarity as openness to illumination. The image asks for a mind less obstructed by its own confusion.

11. R.N. Iyer — “The Mahamudra of Voidness”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 395.

“One must develop those spontaneous reflexes whereby one confronts and dispels distracting thoughts without fascination or excess, bringing the mind back again to the main focus of attention.”

Meditation thought: Use only as much analysis as the distraction requires. Then return attention to the purpose for which you began.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment III, p. 46.

“Thou hast to reach that fixity of mind in which no breeze, however strong, can waft an earthly thought within. Thus purified, the shrine must of all action, sound, or earthly light be void; e’en as the butterfly, o’ertaken by the frost, falls lifeless at the threshold—so must all earthly thoughts fall dead before the fane.”

Meditation thought: Read the shrine as an image of disciplined inward attention. Consider which habits of the day help shelter the contemplative flame.