

Chittavritti

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

A thought can arrive so quickly that we experience its conclusion before noticing its movement. We remember a slight and feel injured again; we hear part of a sentence and imagine the rest. *Chittavritti* names a modification of *chitta*, the mental field in which such events occur. In Patanjali's yoga, as explained by Professor Iyer, these modifications become central to spiritual discipline because the mind habitually identifies with them. What appears within awareness begins to determine what we take ourselves and the world to be.

Chitta is the field; *vritti* is its movement or modification. Keeping the two distinct helps us study an experience without treating it as the whole of mind. A wave has a recognizable form, but it does not exhaust the water in which it arises. Similarly, a thought may occupy attention without possessing final authority over consciousness. The familiar image of a lake is useful here, provided we remember that it illustrates a relation rather than explains the entire metaphysics of mind.

Patanjali distinguishes five kinds of mental modification: *pramana*, correct cognition; *viparyaya*, misconception; *vikalpa*, fantasy or conceptual construction without a corresponding reality; *nidra*, sleep; and *smriti*, memory. These are classes of mental activity, rather than a catalogue of five moral faults. Their distinction from the five *kleshas* is essential. A *klesha* is an affliction, such as ignorance or attachment, that colors experience. A *chittavritti* is a form taken by mental activity, through which that coloring may operate.

Correct cognition includes direct perception, valid inference, and trustworthy testimony. Its presence in this classification can surprise the student. Why restrain something correct? Professor Iyer explains that ordinary knowing, even when accurate, does not by itself release consciousness from delusion and suffering. We need sound knowledge to orient inquiry and conduct, but knowing a formulation is different from realizing the truth to which it points. A person may understand a teaching about patience while remaining impatient with anyone who questions that understanding.

Misconception involves a false apprehension. It may be corrected when its basis is examined, yet the wish to preserve it can resist correction. *Vikalpa* draws attention to another possibility: words and concepts can generate an inward structure that has no adequate counterpart in reality. A feared conversation, rehearsed before it occurs, can begin to feel like an accomplished injury. The mind's capacity to imagine is valuable; its products require discernment when they are used to judge a person or determine a course of action.

Memory preserves what experience has left behind. In Professor Iyer's account, it becomes binding through the retention of, or clinging to, objects and images of subjective experience. Remembering need not be rejected. We require it to learn, keep promises, and recognize consequences. The question concerns its present use. A remembered disappointment may teach appropriate caution, or it may continually supply an accusation against people who had no part in the original event. Self-study distinguishes the lesson from the renewed compulsion.

Sleep is included because an absence of ordinary mental contents is itself a condition of mind. It does not establish emancipation. The aim of yoga is therefore more demanding than a temporary suspension of thought. The student seeks wakeful serenity, with continuity of awareness, rather than a vacancy that cannot know its own condition. This protects the teaching from the tempting assumption that any quiet interval or interruption of familiar experience must be spiritual realization.

The five classes give practical precision to observation. Suppose a message arrives without the greeting we expected. The words on the page are available to perception. The conclusion that the sender is angry is an inference which may need testing. The imagined explanation may be fantasy, while a previous disagreement supplies memory. Several movements have gathered around a few written words. Seeing their different roles allows us to ask a straightforward question instead of replying to an entire inward drama.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception, in this example, means including the conditions under which the message might have been written and the limits of what we know. The sender may be hurried, distracted, or simply brief. We do not replace one unsupported certainty with another. We enlarge the field enough to preserve the possibility of an accurate response. The distinction between observation and interpretation becomes a small discipline of fairness, through which thought begins to serve relationship more faithfully.

Abhyasa and *vairagya* sustain the deeper training. *Abhyasa* returns attention to a chosen steadiness; *vairagya* releases attachment to the passing contents of experience. Professor Iyer associates practice with *prashantavahita*, a continuity of mind that is fully awake and free from fluctuation. The aspiration is developed through persistence. An interruption is recognized, its hold is loosened, and attention returns. There is no need to turn each lapse into a second occupation in which the mind argues with its own disappointment.

The lake image now acquires a clearer meaning. Some waves are troubled and some beautiful, but the spiritual inquiry asks about the capacity to reflect without disturbance. This does not make every useful thought an enemy. Thought prepares, examines, and clarifies; its discipline includes knowing when a task is complete. In "The Mahamudra of Voidness," Professor Iyer

allows a necessary role for analysis in confronting distractions, while describing a gradual movement toward more sustained, unbroken contemplation.

Purposeful mental activity has an important place in this preparation. Professor Iyer distinguishes modifications with which the mind unwittingly identifies from those deliberately chosen for a purpose. A student can therefore use reasoning to examine a proposition, memory to honor an obligation, and imagination to understand a possibility. The exercise includes completing the task and releasing its unnecessary continuation. When we keep rehearsing an argument after its useful work is done, the mind may again be serving attachment. Learning when to stop is part of learning how to think.

Theosophy places this work within the relation between *Manas*, desire, and spiritual insight. Blavatsky's distinction between psychic and noetic action concerns the different directions and capacities of mind. A mental movement can be drawn into personal craving, or brought under a wider and more impersonal understanding. These distinctions should guide inquiry without becoming labels of superiority. Calling a thought noetic does not establish its truth. Its motive, coherence, and relation to the welfare of others still deserve examination.

Human Solidarity gives the discipline an immediate purpose beyond private composure. People suffer when they are treated as the characters in someone else's fear or fantasy. To recognize our own mental constructions is to reduce the harm they can cause. We may still disagree, refuse an unfair demand, or correct an error. The difference lies in responding to what can be responsibly understood, with less distortion from the wish to possess, retaliate, or prove ourselves right.

The restraint of *chittavrittis* begins with such honesty and extends toward a spiritual stillness beyond ordinary thought. Its distant fulfillment need not obscure its present invitation. A memory can be received without rehearsing an injury; an inference can be checked; attention can return to its work. Each response gives the mind a little more freedom to serve the life before it. The lake is cared for through patient practice, until its surface can reveal a depth that restless movement continually concealed.

Glossary

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

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

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

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

Kaivalya — Emancipation or spiritual freedom; in Patanjali, the Seer's release from mistaken identification.

Kama-Manas — Mind associated with desire; the psychic aspect distinguished from higher or noetic *Manas*.

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.

Nidra — Sleep; included among the five kinds of mental modification in Patanjali's yoga.

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

Pramana — Valid or correct cognition, including perception, inference, and trustworthy testimony.

Prashantavahita — A tranquil continuity of mind or consciousness, fully awake and without fluctuations in the cited yogic account.

Purusha — The Seer or spiritual consciousness, distinguished from the changing field of *Prakriti*.

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

Raja — King or ruler; used in *Raja* Yoga and in the symbolic phrase *Rajah* of the senses.

Smriti — Memory, retentiveness, or recollection; also remembered tradition and transmitted sacred literature.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Vasana — Latent craving or a trace of unfulfilled longing; *vasanas* are particular tendencies awaiting conditions for expression.

Vikalpa — Conceptual construction or fantasy without an adequate corresponding reality.

Viparyaya — Misconception or erroneous apprehension; one of the five kinds of mental modification.

Vivekakhyaati — Unbroken discriminative cognition; the continuous discernment of the Seer from the seen.

Vritti — A movement or modification; here, a form taken by mental activity.

Yogabhashya — The traditional commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* cited in Professor Iyer's exposition.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. 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. 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: Notice a mental movement before granting it the authority of identity. This distinction gives self-study a precise beginning.

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

“In general, mental modifications obscure and obstruct the intrinsically blissful nature of pure consciousness, the serene state of mind of the ‘spectator without a spectacle’. 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: Trace perception, inference, fantasy, and memory within one experience. Allow their different roles to become visible before deciding what is true.

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

“Although this array of mental modifications is easy to outline, its implications are extensive and radical. When Patanjali included correct cognition amongst the mental modifications, he was adhering to strict theoretical and practical consistency. He was concerned to deny that mundane insight, discursive thought and even scriptural authority can free the mind from bondage to delusion and suffering.”

Meditation thought: Use accurate knowledge faithfully while remaining open to realization beyond a formulation. Clarity need not become a possession to defend.

4. 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 *chittavruttis*.”

Meditation thought: Do not ask unconsciousness to do the work of spiritual attention. Let quietness remain joined to wakefulness.

5. 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. Together, these two mirror in the world of change that which is changeless beyond it.”

Meditation thought: Practice returning, and practice releasing. Together these disciplines loosen the mind’s dependence on passing contents.

6. 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: Choose continuity over a dramatic effort that quickly exhausts itself. What would help attention remain both alert and unforced?

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

“*Vairagya* cannot be merely passive disinterest in the content of experience any more than sleep can substitute for wakeful serenity. It is true detachment whilst being fully aware of the relative significance of objects, and this element of self-conscious maintenance of calm detachment is exactly what makes it real *vairagya*.”

Meditation thought: Let detachment sharpen care for what a situation actually requires. Indifference would leave that inquiry unfinished.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 280.

“From the standpoint of any individual involved in *prakriti*, unbroken discriminative cognition (*vivekakhyati*) is the sole means to emancipation, for it releases the abiding sense of reality (*purusha*) in him. The dual process of removing the *kleshas* and reflecting on the Self (*purusha*) assures the progressive and climactic attainment of emancipation (*kaivalya*) such that ignorance does not arise again.”

Meditation thought: Keep the Seer and the field of experience distinct in contemplation. Let discrimination deepen through conduct as well as study.

9. 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: Observe a recurrent desire as a supported tendency. Which present habit gives it renewed influence over attention?

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

“Whilst it will be necessary in the initial stages to employ the analytic mind to confront and dispel a great variety of distractions, one should steadily move towards the ideal of an eagle’s soaring flight. One must advance from a state that is essentially one of great distraction to a steady state, in which one may remain undistracted for relatively long periods of time.”

Meditation thought: Allow analysis to serve contemplation without endlessly replacing it. The image of flight suggests a steadiness gradually learned.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 1.

“Having become indifferent to objects of perception, the pupil must seek out the *Rajah* of the senses, the Thought-Producer, he who awakes illusion. The Mind is the great Slayer of the Real. Let the Disciple slay the Slayer.”

Meditation thought: Read the slaying of the slayer as the overcoming of delusive mental domination. The passage calls for discernment, not hostility toward intelligence.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — “Psychic and Noetic Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, Appendix A, p. 441.

“Thus, the whole conclave of psycho-physiologists may be challenged to correctly define Consciousness, and they are sure to fail, because Self-consciousness belongs alone to man and proceeds from the SELF, the higher *Manas*. Only, whereas the psychic element (or *Kama-manas*) is common to both the animal and the human being – the far higher degree of its development in the latter resting merely on the greater perfection and sensitiveness of his cerebral cells – no physiologist, not even the cleverest, will ever be able to solve the mystery of the human mind, in its highest spiritual manifestation, or in its dual aspect of the psychic and the noetic (or the manasic).”

Meditation thought: Hold Blavatsky’s distinction between psychic and noetic action carefully. Ask how motive directs the use of mind without labeling every private impression spiritual.