

Consciousness

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Consciousness is the presence of experience: the capacity to perceive, feel, or know. In everyday conversation we usually mean our waking awareness. Theosophy places this familiar experience within a much wider conception of life. Consciousness has many modes and degrees, expressed through different beings and their instruments of perception. Our human awareness is one expression within that whole. To study consciousness, therefore, is to examine both the world we experience and the limits imposed by the standpoint from which we experience it.

H.P. Blavatsky makes a careful distinction in *The Secret Doctrine*. The teaching that everything lives and is conscious does not mean that every form possesses human thought or animal sensation. Consciousness must be understood according to its own kind and plane. A stone is not being assigned a hidden human biography. The doctrine proposes a living continuity beneath differences that remain significant. It invites reverence for nature while asking us to resist the easy habit of making every other being resemble ourselves.

A further distinction concerns Absolute Consciousness. Ordinary knowing involves a relation between a perceiver and something perceived. Even an inward image is an object for the awareness attending to it. The Absolute, in Theosophical metaphysics, cannot be another object within this relationship, however vast. In "The Seventh Principle," Professor Iyer explains why the One Element can also be described as unconscious: the word points beyond differentiated consciousness, rather than to an absence of awareness such as we ordinarily imagine in sleep.

The apparent contradiction guards against turning the Absolute into an enlarged personality. Both expressions approach the limit of our concepts. Professor Iyer uses Absolute Abstract Space, Eternal Duration, and Eternal Motion to explore this ground of manifestation. Space here is not the interval between two objects; duration is not an indefinitely extended calendar. These are metaphysical approaches to an unconditioned reality. They can widen thought precisely because they frustrate the wish to make the whole universe fit inside familiar mental pictures.

Manifested consciousness, by contrast, always involves conditions. A mode of perception reveals something and leaves something outside its range. The eye responds to a particular field; memory selects from experience; an expectation directs attention before we notice that it has done so. Theosophy extends this principle of differentiated vehicles beyond physical perception to psychic, mental, and spiritual planes. Such distinctions belong to its philosophical account of the cosmos. They should not be confused with a claim that any impressive inner experience establishes its own interpretation.

Within the human constitution, *Manas* is the thinking principle through which awareness becomes reflective. We can attend to a feeling and also ask whether our account of it is sound. This capacity introduces moral responsibility. A desire may be present without determining the action that follows. A remembered injury may demand attention without supplying a complete description of another person. The freedom is often limited, but its possibility matters. Consciousness can begin to examine the assumptions by which it has been governed.

Blavatsky's *The Key to Theosophy* distinguishes the sentient consciousness associated with brain and senses from the Manasic mind illumined by *Buddhi*. Sentient consciousness serves embodied life; spiritual consciousness apprehends meanings that exceed immediate personal advantage. The terms distinguish functions and orientations within a complex human being. They do not divide humanity into permanent classes of superior and inferior people. In a single afternoon we may reason fairly about one matter while refusing to see our own prejudice in another.

The governing image may be a spectrum. One light becomes perceptible in differing expressions, while no single band exhausts its source. The image helps us hold unity and difference together. It also reminds us that a wider range of impressions is not the same thing as wiser judgment. We can accumulate information and remain thoughtless about its use. Spiritual development, in this teaching, involves the quality and direction of awareness: whether understanding becomes more truthful, more inclusive, and more responsible in action.

Consider a community meeting about changing a familiar public space. A long-time resident sees a threatened memory, a parent sees somewhere for children to play, and a worker sees difficulties of access. Each speaks from an actual experience, but none initially sees the whole situation. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception begins when those perspectives are allowed to modify the question itself. Instead of deciding which person possesses the only valid picture, the group asks what arrangement can acknowledge the realities each has brought into view.

This is an ordinary illustration of widening awareness, not a claim that a meeting confers spiritual realization. Its value lies in the connection between perception and responsibility. Human Solidarity becomes practical when another person's experience is treated as part of the situation we must understand. We may still disagree about a proposal. Yet disagreement changes character when we stop assuming that what we fail to notice has no significance. A more adequate decision becomes possible because the field of attention has become less exclusively our own.

Meditation addresses this narrowing at its inward source. Professor Iyer connects noetic self-determination with a sustained orientation toward the spiritual individuality, *Atma-Buddhi-Manas*. The student learns to select thoughts and actions in the light of what is enduring. A period of quiet reflection can reveal how quickly attention is captured by anticipation or

rehearsed complaint. Returning to a worthy idea develops continuity of purpose. The practical question is whether that continuity survives contact with a difficult task, an interruption, or an unwelcome fact.

The distinction between personal memory and spiritual continuity is also important. Theosophy does not identify the enduring individuality with a complete archive of everyday impressions. Experience has to be assimilated into understanding. Remembering an argument in detail is different from learning to recognize the pride that distorted it. The latter kind of learning can alter future conduct. This gives the study of consciousness a direction beyond accumulation: what we encounter becomes material through which a more discerning and compassionate thinker may develop.

Such observation requires patience. A distracted day does not cancel an honest aspiration, and an unusually quiet sitting does not establish permanent wisdom. The mind learns through repeated effort and correction. Its changing contents can be studied without turning each passing condition into a final verdict on the person. This permits a steadier kind of hope: the awareness that sees a habit need not continue serving it unquestioningly. Even a modest change in attention may make room for a response that yesterday seemed unavailable.

The same inquiry reaches beyond human relationships. If life is understood as a connected whole, our treatment of animals, plants, and the material world becomes a question of stewardship. We need not pretend to know the inward experience of every form in order to act carefully. Indeed, acknowledging the limits of our perception can make care more exact. A landscape has relations and rhythms that remain invisible to someone looking only for immediate utility. Greater attention can teach restraint before complete understanding is possible.

The Voice of the Silence carries the inquiry toward a realization in which the seeker discovers the deeper source of the search. Its language speaks to the culmination of discipline, not to a personal claim casually adopted. For the present, the work is close at hand: to notice more faithfully, to examine what distorts attention, and to let understanding alter conduct. A consciousness less confined by its own familiar picture can receive more of another being's reality. Through that opening, the study of awareness becomes a more considerate participation in life.

Glossary

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

Absolute Abstract Space — A metaphysical symbol of unconditioned reality, distinct from measurable distances between objects.

Absolute Consciousness — A designation for consciousness beyond the subject-object relations of ordinary awareness; not an enlarged form of personal consciousness.

Arhat — A spiritually liberated adept; the quotation refers to the *Arhat* secret doctrine as a source of metaphysical teaching.

Atma-Buddhi-Manas — *Atman*, *Buddhi*, and higher *Manas* considered together as the enduring spiritual triad.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman*; associated with intuitive discernment. Buddhic means pertaining to *Buddhi*.

Conditioned consciousness — Awareness expressed through particular relations, circumstances, and instruments of perception.

Differentiation — The emergence of distinct forms, functions, or conditions within manifestation.

Esoteric — Inward or hidden in meaning; requiring deeper understanding than familiarity with outward forms.

Eternal Duration — A metaphysical conception beyond measured time and successive events.

Eternal Motion — The ceaseless principle of activity associated with the Great Breath, distinguished from a particular physical movement.

Fohat — The dynamic power linking cosmic ideation with manifested life; Fohatic means pertaining to this power.

Great Breath — A symbol of eternal motion and the rhythms of manifestation and withdrawal in Theosophical cosmology.

Gupta Vidya — Hidden or secret wisdom; Professor Iyer's designation for an integrated philosophy of spiritual knowledge and human perfectibility.

Human Solidarity — Shared human dignity and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility for others.

Individuality — The enduring thinking Ego in Theosophical usage, distinguished from the personality of a particular life.

Individuation — The emergence or focus of self-conscious individuality; not identical with selfish separation.

Ishvara — A designation for divine intelligence or lordship within manifestation; its meaning depends on the philosophical system.

Manas — The thinking principle or self-conscious mind; its higher individuality and lower personal ray are distinguished. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

Manifestation — The expression of reality through differentiated forms, relations, and conditions.

Manvantara — A period of manifested cosmic activity, contrasted with *pralaya*.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental principles and relations of reality beyond immediate appearances.

Noetic — Pertaining to the higher or spiritual mind; associated here with *Buddhi-Manas* and an understanding rooted in unity.

Noetic self-determination — The conscious direction of thought and action from the standpoint of the spiritual individuality.

One Element — A designation for the undifferentiated ground of all manifestation, rather than a chemical element.

One Life — The universal living ground expressed through diverse forms and beings in Theosophical teaching.

Panoply — A complete or extensive array; the quotation applies it to cosmic forces.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories, and roles of a particular life, distinguished from the enduring individuality.

Plane — A level or mode of being or consciousness; not necessarily a location in physical space.

Pralaya — Dissolution or a period of non-manifestation.

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

Sentient — Capable of sensation or feeling; in these passages, used for awareness associated with the embodied instruments.

Spiritual Sun — An inward or metaphysical source of illumination, distinguished from the physical sun as an object of sight.

Subject and object — The perceiver and what is perceived; a central distinction within conditioned consciousness.

Svara — Sound, tone, or breath; the quotation relates it to the pulsation of a universal spiritual law.

Transcendence — A standpoint or reality exceeding a particular set of limitations; transcendent and transcendental are related forms.

Vedic — Pertaining to the Vedas and the traditions of thought associated with them.

Vehicle — An instrument or means through which a principle of consciousness is expressed.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I — p. 49

“Esoteric philosophy teaches that everything lives and is conscious, but not that all life and consciousness are similar to those of human or even animal beings. Life we look upon as ‘the one form of existence,’ manifesting in what is called matter; or, as in man, what, incorrectly separating them, we name Spirit, Soul and Matter. Matter is the vehicle for the manifestation of soul on this plane of existence, and soul is the vehicle on a higher plane for the manifestation of spirit, and these three are a trinity synthesized by Life, which pervades them all.”

Meditation thought: The teaching joins life, soul, and spirit without making their expressions identical. Let the recognition of a common ground increase care for forms of existence whose inward character remains beyond familiar human experience.

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I — p. 274

“Everything in the Universe, throughout all its kingdoms, is conscious: i.e., endowed with a consciousness of its own kind and on its own plane of perception. We men must remember that because we do not perceive any signs — which we can recognise — of consciousness, say, in stones, we have no right to say that no consciousness exists there.”

Meditation thought: Our failure to recognize a kind of awareness is a limit of perception, not a complete account of what exists. Consider how this distinction might make both inquiry and the treatment of nature more attentive.

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I — p. 2

“It is the one life, eternal, invisible, yet Omnipresent, without beginning or end, yet periodical in its regular manifestations, between which periods reigns the dark mystery of non-Being; unconscious, yet absolute Consciousness; unrealisable, yet the one self-existing reality; truly, ‘a chaos to the sense, a Kosmos to the reason.’ Its one absolute attribute, which is itself, eternal, ceaseless Motion, is called in esoteric parlance the ‘Great Breath,’ which is the perpetual motion of the universe, in the sense of limitless, ever-present space.”

Meditation thought: The One Life is approached through language that stretches beyond ordinary distinctions. Hold the image of the Great Breath without reducing it to physical breathing or imagining the whole as an enlarged human personality.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy* — p. 101

“The clue lies in the double consciousness of our mind, and also, in the dual nature of the mental ‘principle.’ There is a spiritual consciousness, the Manasic mind illumined by the light of *Buddhi*, that which subjectively perceives abstractions; and the sentient consciousness (the lower Manasic light), inseparable from our physical brain and senses.”

Meditation thought: Consciousness includes different modes of knowing. Attend to the difference between a reaction shaped by sensation and a thought whose meaning becomes clearer when personal advantage is allowed a less dominant place.

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Seventh Principle” — p. 83

“In pointing to these distinctions, H.P. Blavatsky was not merely making philosophic points about different schools, but was conveying and intimating the profound Teachings of what she called the *Arhat* secret doctrine. In this doctrine there is ultimately only One Element, and that element — if it is to be characterized at all in the language of consciousness — is unconscious. It is not unconscious in the sense that one might ordinarily attribute to a sleeping person or to a rock, for this sense of the term ‘unconscious’ is relative to limited states of consciousness in a world of differentiation. To speak of the One Element as unconscious is to imply its total transcendence of all differentiation and manifestation.”

Meditation thought: Unconscious here means beyond differentiated awareness, rather than a failure to be awake. The paradox asks us to recognize the limits of our concepts while continuing the inquiry with patience and intellectual humility.

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Seventh Principle” — p. 84

“Another way of saying this is that the one primordial element is totally inert or passive, without any relationship to anything outside itself. At the same time, it is absolute, indestructible and eternal, being independent of everything in the universe and, indeed, independent of the universe itself. It is independent of everything that arises in space and time, and therefore independent of worlds and *manvantaras*. It transcends even the distinction

between *manvantara* and *pralaya*, and its being is independent of the existence of a god or gods or the entire plenitude and panoply of forces at work in the cosmos. Hence, it is appropriate to symbolize this one ultimate element as Space.”

Meditation thought: The primordial ground is not one object among other objects. Its independence challenges the habit of imagining ultimate reality as something that must compete for a place within the world it makes possible.

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Seventh Principle” — p. 84

“In *Gupta Vidya* Space is one of the foremost means of representing and seeking understanding of the Absolute. This is not space in any relational sense, but Absolute Abstract Space, which exists eternally and transcends all distinctions between the manifest and the unmanifest. Because it is beyond *manvantaras* and *pralayas*, it is equivalent to Eternal Duration. One cannot even begin to think upon this one Absolute Abstract Space, boundless and universal, without also thinking about Eternal Duration. In turn, both of these are related to Eternal Motion.”

Meditation thought: Absolute Space and Eternal Duration widen the frame of thought beyond measurable intervals. Let their contemplation loosen the assumption that our immediate circumstances supply the only possible horizon of understanding.

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Seventh Principle” — p. 84

“Eternal Motion linked to Absolute Abstract Space and Duration generates the possibility of conceiving a consciousness which is indistinguishable from unconsciousness, but which is characterizable as Absolute Consciousness. From this originates the entire realm of differentiated and individuated consciousness, the world of subjects and objects on seven different planes.”

Meditation thought: The distinction between an unconditioned ground and differentiated consciousness protects both unity and diversity. Consider how a particular standpoint can be meaningful without exhausting the reality from which its capacity to know proceeds.

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Seventh Principle” — p. 84

“That which is ascribed here to *Ishvara* and to *svara* in Hindu metaphysics would be ascribed by Buddhists to the One Law or, in Tibetan terms, *Fohat*, which is itself the aspect of pulsation of that One Law. These differences of terminology reflect not only differences of language but also of conceptualization bearing upon the spiritual exercises in both systems.”

Meditation thought: Different metaphysical vocabularies can direct attention toward related questions while preserving differences of approach. Seek the intended relation carefully, without assuming that similar words or symbols always carry precisely the same meaning.

10. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Seventh Principle” — p. 85

“This purifying property of space is a recurrent theme throughout the literature of *Gupta Vidya*. It suggests that if one really knew how to persist and to progress far enough and long enough through deep meditation in understanding the supreme absolute Void, one could totally transform one’s consciousness.”

Meditation thought: The passage describes a profound contemplative transformation. Its direction can be honored through patient practice, allowing familiar objects of attachment to become less authoritative over the whole field of attention.

11. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Noetic Self-Determination” — p. 275

“To be able to see noetically one must begin by focussing upon the Spiritual Sun. This means that one must embark upon a programme of meditation and mental discipline directed to making conscious and consistent a secure sense of immortality. True immortality belongs to the *Atma-Buddhi-Manas*, the noetic individuality, and must be made real as an active principle of selection in reference to the lower principles.”

Meditation thought: Immortality is presented as a principle of selection in daily life. Ask which thought deserves cultivation because it develops understanding or care beyond the immediate satisfaction of the personal self.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence* — p. 17

“Behold! thou hast become the Light, thou hast become the Sound, thou art thy Master and thy God. Thou art THYSELF the object of thy search: the VOICE unbroken, that resounds throughout eternities, exempt from change, from sin exempt, the seven sounds in one, *THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE*.”

Meditation thought: This is the language of spiritual consummation, not a casual assertion of personal attainment. Receive its image of light and sound as an invitation to the sustained discipline through which the deeper Self may become known.