

Dharana

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Dharana is the deliberate concentration of consciousness upon a chosen focus. In Patanjali's yoga it is the sixth limb, following the disciplines that prepare conduct, body and senses for inward work. Professor Iyer defines it as the focussing of consciousness on a particular point, which may be an object or a subject selected by the mind. HPB emphasizes intense concentration upon an interior object, accompanied by withdrawal from external distractions. Together these descriptions invite an exact question: can attention remain where understanding has asked it to remain, instead of being continually carried away?

The beginning is familiar even though the mature discipline is demanding. We set out to consider an idea and discover that a sound, a memory or an anticipated conversation has taken its place. Often the departure occurs before it is noticed. *Dharana* begins to become intelligible when this movement is recognized and attention is deliberately restored. The return is part of the learning. A moment of distraction need not become a judgement upon the whole person; it can disclose the habits through which consciousness is dispersed and the patient work required to gather it.

The choice of a focus does not make concentration arbitrary. In spiritual practice, its meaning and purpose matter. A worthy principle can give the mind something enduring to explore, while ethical preparation helps determine how the power of attention will be used. Professor Iyer insists upon the relation of the last three limbs of yoga to the preceding five. A concentrated mind could still be governed by ambition, resentment or possessiveness. *Dharana* belongs to the path of wisdom when its strength is joined to discrimination, self-restraint and a concern extending beyond private accomplishment.

In "*Vibhuti Pada*," Professor Iyer carefully distinguishes *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. *Dharana* fixes attention; *dhyana* sustains its flow in one direction; *samadhi* deepens that absorption until the object stands alone and the separative sense of contemplating recedes. When the three are integrated, the term *sanyama* names their united operation. These meanings should not be flattened into a general word for relaxation. A quiet mood can be welcome, but the yogic account concerns definite transformations in the relation between consciousness and its object. Precision helps preserve both the beginning and the distant goal.

HPB's note on *dharana* in *The Voice of the Silence* stresses withdrawal from the external world of the senses. This is a particular inward emphasis within a text of spiritual instruction. Professor Iyer's definition describes the focusing operation more broadly before tracing its higher

development. The descriptions need not be forced into a contradiction. Their contexts differ, and both direct the student towards freedom from distraction. Neither requires contempt for the visible world. Withdrawal can serve a clearer return, just as a person may step back from a crowded discussion in order to understand what is being asked.

An ordinary exercise in understanding may begin with one sentence from a serious text. Instead of immediately moving to the next paragraph, we ask what its principal terms mean, how they are related, and what follows if the statement is true. Attention remains with the subject while the enquiry develops. This is a preparatory application, not a declaration that formal *dharana* has been mastered. It reveals how concentration can make thought more spacious within a chosen field. The mind need not multiply topics in order to discover depth; it can learn to stay long enough for a meaning to unfold.

Concentration also differs from rigid fixation. A fixation may continually return to the same grievance while excluding whatever would correct it. *Dharana* in the spiritual discipline is supported by an aspiration towards truth and by the willingness to relinquish distortion. Its steadiness should make perception clearer. We can remain with a question while allowing an assumption to be revised. The lamp of attention is useful because it illuminates what is before it; its purpose is defeated if the light is employed only to make a preferred picture appear more convincing.

Human Solidarity gives this capacity a humane application. When someone speaks of a difficulty, we may notice how quickly attention moves towards our own experience or an answer we are eager to give. Staying with what is actually being said allows the other person's situation to become clearer. Listening is not identical with the technical state of *dharana*, but the ethical kinship is real: attention is offered instead of continually reclaimed for ourselves. Such steadiness can prevent a careless reply and make help more proportionate to the need, including the possibility that understanding is needed before advice.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception does not always require a wider quantity of information. Sometimes it requires deeper attention to one relationship. A disagreement that seems to concern a small decision may involve responsibilities, fears or assumptions that have not yet been understood. Concentrated enquiry can hold the particular matter within its wider setting. The circle enlarges because attention becomes more inclusive of relevant causes, not because it loses its focus. This application joins the discipline of staying with a subject to the moral task of seeing beyond the first personal reaction.

Professor Iyer relates concentration to the refinement of *Manas*, the thinking principle. When its movements are governed less by restless desire, the mind can become more receptive to *Buddhi*, spiritual discernment. This is a transformation of use and orientation, not simply an increase in

mental force. The same faculties that once defended a narrow identity can become instruments of a more universal understanding. The gradual preparation includes motive, conduct and self-study because clarity cannot be separated from the conditions under which attention is repeatedly employed.

The element of continuity requires patience. In “*Samadhi Pada*,” Professor Iyer rejects the idea that fragmented consciousness can suddenly bridge the whole distance to unified meditation. Repeated effort develops the capacity to remain, and detachment helps prevent the effort from hardening into an anxious demand for achievement. One may notice progress in a more truthful appraisal of distraction, a less dramatic return, or greater fidelity to an ordinary task. These signs should be received modestly. The aim is to make attention useful, not to construct an identity around possessing unusual powers.

There is a corresponding discipline at the end of an effort. What has been understood should be allowed to inform conduct. If contemplation of a principle produces no willingness to change a relevant action, its practical meaning remains incomplete. Professor Iyer describes ascent in consciousness as requiring a conscious return into life. The insight must become available where relationships, responsibilities and choices are encountered. A concentrated period of study can then continue quietly through the day, as a remembered distinction prevents a harsh judgement or a clarified purpose helps complete neglected work.

Dharana offers the dignity of being present to what deserves attention. Its first lessons can be modest: remaining with a sentence, finishing a careful task, hearing a person accurately. Its spiritual horizon is much greater, belonging to the integrated discipline through which consciousness becomes capable of profound contemplation. Between the beginning and that horizon lies a patient education of motive and mind. The lamp is tended so that its light may become steady. What it reveals can then be received with greater honesty and offered, through wiser action, to the life we share.

Glossary

Abhyasa — Persistent practice; the sustained effort to abide in a steady state of awareness.

Anga — A limb or aspect; the eight *angas* are the interrelated disciplines of Patanjali’s yoga.

Ashtangayoga — Eight-limbed yoga; Patanjali’s integrated discipline of ethical preparation and meditation.

Atman — The universal spiritual Self in Theosophy; also written *Atma*.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman* in Theosophy, associated with intuitive discernment and the illumination of mind.

Contemplative — Pertaining to sustained, reflective or meditative attention directed towards meaning and spiritual understanding.

Dharana — Deliberate concentration upon a chosen focus; the sixth limb of Patanjali's yoga.

Dhyana — The sustained flow of concentrated attention; the meditative phase distinguished from *dharana* and *samadhi* in the cited exposition.

Discernment — The capacity to distinguish accurately; in spiritual contexts, insight into what is true and enduring.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relevant relationships, causes and responsibilities outside an immediate personal view.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity and interdependence, made active through thoughtful responsibility and care.

Individuality — The enduring spiritual centre in the Theosophical account, distinguished from the temporary personality of one life.

Lanoo — A disciple or student; a form of address used in *The Voice of the Silence*.

Manas — The thinking principle in Theosophy; mind capable of orientation towards desire or towards spiritual discernment.

Maya — Illusion or the conditioned appearance of things; especially the obscuration of enduring reality through misapprehension.

Meditative absorption — The deepening of concentration in which consciousness becomes profoundly engaged with its object or spiritual focus.

Pratyahara — Withdrawal or abstraction of the senses from their objects, preparing consciousness for inward concentration.

Purusha — The spiritual seer or Self in *Sankhya* and Yoga; Professor Iyer interprets its highest realization through a universal spiritual synthesis.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; in the cited account, a deepening in which the object stands alone and the sense of separateness recedes.

Sanyama — The integrated operation of *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*; also commonly transliterated *samyama*.

Yoga — An integrated discipline of ethical preparation, concentration and spiritual realization.

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

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer, "Vibhuti Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 285.

"*Dharana* is full concentration, the focussing of consciousness on a particular point, which may be any object in the world or a subject chosen by the mind. The ability to fix attention is strengthened by the practice of the first five *angas* of Patanjali's *ashtangayoga*, for without some cultivation of them the mind tends to meander and drift in every direction."

Meditation thought: *Dharana* establishes a chosen focus and depends upon prior cultivation. Recognizing the mind's tendency to wander is part of understanding the work, not a verdict against the learner.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 1, note on *Dharana*.

"*Dharana*, is the intense and perfect concentration of the mind upon some one interior object, accompanied by complete abstraction from everything pertaining to the external Universe, or the world of the senses."

Meditation thought: HPB emphasizes concentration upon an interior object and withdrawal from external distractions. This definition should be read in the context of her spiritual instruction.

3. R.N. Iyer, "Vibhuti Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 285.

"*Dhyana* is meditation in the technical sense of the term, meaning the calm sustaining of focussed attention. In *dhyana*, consciousness still encounters some modifications, but they all flow in one direction and are not disturbed by other fluctuations of any sort. Rather like iron – consisting of molecules clustered together in various ways, their axes oriented in different directions – undergoes a shift of alignment of all molecules in a single direction when magnetized, so too consciousness can become unidirectional through experiencing a current of continuity in time."

Meditation thought: *Dhyana* concerns the sustained direction of attention. Distinguishing this continuity from the initial focusing of *dharana* helps preserve the precision of the yogic account.

4. R.N. Iyer, "Vibhuti Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 285.

"*Samadhi*, broadly characterized as 'meditative absorption' or 'full meditation', signifies the deepening of *dhyana* until the chosen object of meditation stands alone and consciousness is no longer aware of itself as contemplating an object. In *samadhi*, consciousness loses the sense of separateness from what is contemplated and, in effect, becomes one with it. Like a person wholly lost in their work, 'the object stands by itself,' in the words of the *Yogabhashya*, as if there were only the object itself. Although these three phases can be viewed as separate and

successive, when they occur together in one simultaneous act they constitute *sanyama*, serene constraint or luminous concentration."

Meditation thought: *Samadhi* deepens the relation to the object of contemplation. *Sanyama* names the integrated operation of the three phases, rather than an additional unrelated technique.

5. R.N. Iyer, "Vibhuti Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 285.

"*Sanyama*, Patanjali taught, is not completely mastered all at once. Rather, once *sanyama* is attained, it is strengthened in stages by deft application to different objects and levels of being. Each such application reveals the divine light as it manifests in that context, until the adept practitioner of exalted *sanyama* can focus entirely on *purusha* itself."

Meditation thought: Even the higher discipline develops through successive applications. The passage encourages respect for gradual mastery and for the different levels at which understanding must become effective.

6. R.N. Iyer, "Sadhana Pada," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 283.

"*Pratyahara*, abstraction and disassociation of sensory perception from sense-objects, is now accessible. Withdrawal of the senses from their objects of attraction does not destroy them. Rather, the subtler senses take on the plastic and fluidic nature of the serene mind itself. Without the myriad distractions of familiar and strange sense-objects, the senses become subtilized and pliant, no longer pulling consciousness towards internal images, external objects or captivating sense-data."

Meditation thought: Withdrawal changes the relation between attention and sensory attraction. Its purpose is increased freedom and pliancy, not hostility towards the visible world or destruction of the senses.

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

"But Patanjali knew that no one can suddenly bridge the gap between fragmented, distracted consciousness and wholly unified meditation. Rather, concentration (*samadhi*) proceeds by degrees for one who persists in the effort, because one progressively overcomes everything that hinders it. In the arduous ascent from greater degrees of relative *maya* towards greater degrees of reality, the transformation of consciousness requires a calm apprehension of those higher states."

Meditation thought: Unified attention is approached by degrees. Patience allows a modest beginning to be valued while preserving an honest sense of the greater transformation still required.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Cognition, Breath and Speech," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 77.

"At any age in life, one must attempt these disciplines. No matter at what level one approaches the problem, one must learn to abstract, to withdraw, to sustain intact a subtler awareness. If

one can develop a capacity to enjoy ideas and to penetrate through meditation to a certain level of consciousness, this will eventually become a continuous current in one's life to which one can return again and again."

Meditation thought: Repeated reflection can establish an inward current to which the mind returns. A worthy idea becomes a lasting resource when it is actually contemplated.

9. R.N. Iyer, "*Samadhi Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 275.

"Overcoming mental obstructions through *abhyasa* in respect to one principle requires the progressive purification of the mind, freeing it from the froth and dross of old patterns fostered by feeble and fickle attention. Most seekers typically find easiest and most effective a concerted effort to expand the feeling of friendliness towards all beings, compassion for every creature, inward gladness and a cool detachment in regard to pleasure and pain, virtue and vice."

Meditation thought: A concentrated mind needs an ethical orientation. Friendliness and compassion help direct its growing steadiness towards a more inclusive understanding of life.

10. R.N. Iyer, "*Samadhi Pada*," *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 272.

"The conscious descent from exalted planes of being requires the capacity to bring down a clearer awareness of reality into the grosser regions of *maya*. Continuous self-transformation on the ascent must be converted into confident self-transmutation on the descent."

Meditation thought: An inward ascent calls for a conscious return. Whatever has become clearer should become available in conduct, relationships and the responsibilities of the day.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 16.

"Where is thy individuality, *Lanoo*, where the *Lanoo* himself? It is the spark lost in the fire, the drop within the ocean, the ever-present Ray become the All and the eternal radiance. And now, *Lanoo*, thou art the doer and the witness, the radiator and the radiation, Light in the Sound, and the Sound in the Light."

Meditation thought: The image belongs to the text's exalted account of spiritual unity. It gives concentration a horizon beyond personal mastery while reminding us of the limits of ordinary description.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 10.

"Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce Sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer's eye."

Meditation thought: Attention offered to another person's suffering is a humane application of steadiness. Listening accurately can be the beginning of more proportionate and useful help.