

Elementals

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Elementals are the lives and formative agencies through which Nature is understood to work in Theosophical teaching. The term reaches beyond the familiar figures of earth, water, air and fire in folklore. It concerns the relation between consciousness and substance, the countless constituents of visible and invisible forms, and the powers through which impressions acquire persistence. Professor Iyer's account begins with a living universe: the human being participates in the same order that sustains the surrounding world.

A garden offers a useful governing image. What appears to be one place contains many forms of life, many activities and many rhythms of growth. The gardener enters relationships already under way. Care changes the conditions in which those lives develop. This image cannot establish the existence of invisible beings, but it helps the mind approach the doctrine's central demand: to regard the field entrusted to consciousness with attention, responsibility and respect for its complexity.

The scope of the word must remain clear. In one technical use, elementals belong to kingdoms preceding the mineral kingdom. Professor Iyer also employs a much wider range, extending from formative agencies in the lower vestures to subtle divine elements on higher planes. A definition restricted to mischievous nature spirits would miss this breadth. Equally, the term should not make every kind of being interchangeable. The level, function and context determine what is meant in a particular passage.

In "Elementals," Professor Iyer describes man and Nature as aggregates informed by streams of ideation originating in Universal Mind. The teaching does not picture matter as wholly passive and consciousness as a visitor from an unrelated world. *Fohat* names the dynamic relation through which ideation impresses substance with form. The elements in this account are not simply the chemical elements of a laboratory. Their traditional names refer to modes and levels that cannot be mapped directly onto modern physical categories.

The human being is consequently a microcosm. Body, sensation, feeling and thought participate in different aspects of a larger order. Professor Iyer speaks of elementals in every human principle except *Atman*, the universal spiritual Self. He distinguishes this broad participation from *Prana*, the current of life-energy particularly associated with the living organism and its astral vehicle. Elementals participate in that current, but the current alone does not define their nature or exhaust their range.

This distinction gives the doctrine an inward use. Much of what a person calls the self consists of acquired habits, remembered injuries, bodily responses and repeated expectations. Professor Iyer describes a false identity, constructed through identification with the senses and personal labels, as a dominant elemental. This is an account of the conditioned personality, not a judgment that another human being lacks dignity. Its purpose is to loosen a mistaken identification so that the spiritual thinker can become more responsible for the instruments it uses.

Suppose irritation has become a familiar response to interruption. Before a visitor has explained the need, the face tightens and the answer grows sharp. The student can notice the sequence without giving it the authority of a permanent character. A pause, an accurate question and a considerate reply begin to establish another pattern. In the doctrine's language, the field is being reeducated. Its practical value lies in attending to what is actually repeated and in giving a better response sustained opportunity to take root.

The gardening image helps here. Pulling at a plant does not make it grow more wisely, and one afternoon of care cannot replace a season of neglect. Likewise, a single resolution does not instantly reorganize the habits of speech and attention. Firmness can coexist with patience. One can make a correction, repeat it and observe the conditions that make it easier or harder. The work remains exact without becoming an inward campaign of hostility against oneself.

Speech makes the relation between inward and outward especially evident. A remark carries more than information; it can establish an expectation, strengthen resentment or make cooperation possible. Consider a shared workshop where mistakes are routinely met with ridicule. People begin to hide uncertainty. If someone starts asking clear questions and correcting errors without humiliation, the atmosphere can gradually change. The occult teaching interprets this formative influence more widely, but its immediate ethical demand is already visible in the quality of human relations.

Motive therefore belongs at the beginning of inquiry. Professor Iyer asks that the study of elementals be directed toward regeneration on behalf of all. A fascination with acquiring private influence would carry the student away from that purpose. Knowledge should make a person more considerate in the use of ordinary powers: attention, imagination, speech and will. These are already consequential. There is ample work in learning to employ them steadily before seeking unfamiliar experiences or making claims about hidden capacities.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means remembering that the garden has no wall separating it absolutely from the surrounding world. In Theosophical terms, no personal vesture exists in isolation from the larger field of life. Self-correction gains meaning through its effect upon relationships and responsibilities. It can begin with the treatment of a shared room, the

care of a tool, the manner of receiving a visitor or the quality of thought brought to a difficult task.

Human Solidarity gives this discipline its humane direction. One's difficulties should increase sensitivity to the difficulties of others. The effort to become orderly and composed loses its purpose if it produces contempt for people who struggle. Professor Iyer warns against making a fortress of private virtue. An improved capacity for attention should open a door: to understand a need more accurately, to bear a duty more reliably, or to offer help without adding the burden of self-importance.

The teaching also asks for discrimination between observation and interpretation. A student can recognize a recurring reaction without claiming to identify an invisible entity behind it. The metaphysical account invites sustained study; it does not confer instant knowledge of every cause. Humility protects both the inquiry and the people affected by it. One can take responsibility for a harsh word while remaining honest about the limits of one's understanding of the hidden processes of Nature.

Meditation, understood as recollection and disciplined thought, helps restore a wider standpoint. For a few moments the person can consider the shared life underlying separate appearances, then return to a particular duty. The value of the interval appears in conduct: a little less haste, a more faithful attention, a motive less entangled in the demand for recognition. Such changes give spiritual study a place in the ordinary day without making ordinary life a stage for spiritual display.

The older vocabulary also distinguishes elementals from elementaries, a term used for certain post-mortem remnants or conditions associated with human personalities. Similar names should not lead the student to identify nature agencies with departed people. The distinction illustrates a general discipline of reading: establish how an author uses a term before building an explanation upon it.

The garden is never finished. Its care requires renewed observation, proportion and willingness to learn. Elementals, approached through Professor Iyer's teaching, become a reminder that consciousness is a participant in a living field. To tend that field is to make one's presence less careless and more helpful. A quiet habit of truthful speech, a considerate use of energy and a sustained wish for the welfare of others allow the work to continue where it matters most: in the life one actually shares.

Glossary

Astral — Pertaining to a subtle order of substance or experience; the astral vehicle is distinguished from the visible physical body.

Atman — Universal Spirit or Self; the spiritual ground common to beings, distinguished from a person's temporary identity.

Congeries — An aggregate or collection of different constituents.

Devas — Shining or celestial beings; *devatas* is a related form. Their functions and spiritual levels vary with context.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Enlarging the field of thought to include wider relationships, consequences and the welfare of others.

Elementals — Lives and formative agencies associated with Nature. The term includes specific elemental kingdoms and, in Professor Iyer's broader usage, many levels of formative power.

Elementaries — A term used for certain disembodied human remnants or conditions in the older Theosophical vocabulary; distinguished from elemental nature agencies.

Fohat — The dynamic relation between cosmic ideation and substance, described through several levels of potentiality and manifestation.

Gnomes, sylphs, salamanders and undines — Traditional names for beings associated respectively with earth, air, fire and water; these are elemental symbols, not zoological classifications.

Gupta Vidya — Sacred or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected Theosophical writings.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for the welfare of others.

Ideation — The activity or formation of thought; cosmic ideation is considered as a spiritual source of manifested order.

Life-atoms — The living constituents of human and natural vestures in Theosophical teaching, considered in relation to formative and spiritual influences.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental nature and principles of reality; metaphysical means pertaining to that inquiry.

Microcosm and macrocosm — The smaller and larger orders considered through correspondence; especially the human being and the cosmos.

Occult — Hidden; in this context, concerning the spiritual philosophy of unseen causes and levels of existence.

Personality — The temporary identity, habits and instruments associated with a particular life, distinguished from enduring spiritual individuality.

Planes — Levels or orders of consciousness and substance within the Theosophical account of manifestation.

Post-mortem — After death; used of the states and processes considered between incarnations.

Prana — Life-energy; in the quoted teaching, the current associated with the organism and its astral vehicle.

Primordial — Belonging to an original or pre-differentiated condition.

Regeneration — Renewal of consciousness and conduct through spiritual and ethical transformation.

Sensorium — The integrated field or apparatus of sensory perception.

Seven kingdoms of Nature — The Theosophical sequence of three elemental kingdoms followed by mineral, vegetable, animal and human kingdoms.

Substance — The underlying material or field of manifestation in the metaphysical account; it is not restricted to ordinary physical matter.

Universal Mind — The spiritual source or field of cosmic ideation; its relation to *Mahat* varies with the standpoint being discussed.

Upadhi — A basis, vehicle or limiting condition through which a principle acts; *upadhis* is the plural.

Vehicle — A principle or medium through which another principle can be expressed; *Buddhi* is the spiritual vehicle of *Atman*.

Vesture — A sheath, vehicle or instrument through which consciousness acts; *vestures* is the plural.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 319.

“Both man and Nature are composed of a complex congeries of elemental entities endowed with character and perceptible form by continuous streams of ideation originating in Universal Mind. Virtually everything perceived by man, virtually every faculty of action, is such an aggregate of elementals. All the various modes and modulations of active and passive intelligence in man exist and subsist within these fields of elementals, and no aspect of human life is comprehensible without some grasp of elemental existence.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate the body and mind as participating in a living order whose smallest constituents deserve care.

2. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, pp. 319–320.

“An authentic approach to the doctrine of elementals must be motivated by a desire to regenerate oneself on behalf of all. Both wisdom and compassion are needed if one would master the ways in which a human being may work upon elementals and also be acted upon by them.”

Meditation thought: Begin inquiry with a wish to become more useful. Motive gives direction to the use of knowledge.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 320.

“Real human welfare and well-being proceed from within without, beginning in the mind and heart and enacted through responsibility in thought and speech before they are reflected in outward action.”

Meditation thought: Attend to the intention preparing to become a word. What quality will that word carry into the room?

4. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 320.

“One must do this without falling into increasing self-obsession. One must sustain a universal motive. Merely building a fortress around one's own virtue is incompatible with teaching elementals and giving them the sort of beneficial impress that makes them a healing force in society.”

Meditation thought: Keep self-correction connected to the welfare of others, so that it remains generous and proportionate.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 320.

“Metaphysically, the doctrine of elementals encompasses the wide range of *devas* and *devatas*, gods and demigods, on seven different planes of differentiated cosmic substance. Extending far beyond medieval lore about gnomes, sylphs, salamanders and undines, the true teaching concerning elementals begins with the root processes by which thought impresses matter with form through *Fohat*.”

Meditation thought: Look beyond familiar folklore toward the relationship between formative intelligence and the world of appearances.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 321.

“Thus man is one with the rootless root of the cosmos, a differentiated being compounded of every conceivable element in every one of the kingdoms of Nature. All the seven kingdoms are in a human being. This, of course, involves not only the physical body, but a series of vestures or *upadhis* on several different planes. In all the vestures of the human being, there is not a single element of any of the kingdoms of Nature, or any of the elemental forces, that is not already present.”

Meditation thought: Let the idea of a microcosm awaken reverence for the complexity of an ordinary human life.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 322.

“*Gupta Vidya* teaches that spirit is sublimated matter and matter is condensed spirit. There is no point in space where there is not a spark of universal spirit, and there is not a set of particles derived from primordial substance which is not alive with divine intelligence. The seeming gap between mind and matter is an illusion created by the sensorium.”

Meditation thought: Question the habit of treating inward life and outward substance as entirely unrelated worlds.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 323.

“This corruption of thought through language has led most human beings to create a false sense of identity which is actually a dominant elemental. This offspring of pseudo-self-consciousness is made up of the lower four elements – earth, air, fire and water, both gross and astral – and it goes by the name of Mr. X or Ms. Y. The tragedy is that the souls who have conjured these elementals out of their identification with the sensorium mistake them for their own real natures, and confuse the elemental apparitions created by other souls for real human beings.”

Meditation thought: Notice a label that has replaced a living person in your thoughts. Give attention back to the person.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 325.

“Elementals reach out to the highest aspects of existence, which is why it is extremely misleading to link elementals merely to one principle, such as *prana*, in sevenfold man. All life-energy works through all life-atoms; there is, therefore, a life-current existing in human nature which may be called *prana*. It is a sort of sum-total or quantum of life-energy within the metabolic system of the human body or, more correctly, within the astral body.”

Meditation thought: Keep a technical word open to the several levels on which the author uses it.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 325.

“It flows in that body like a fluidic current, and one might say that the elementals participate actively in it, as if swimming in an ocean of pranic life-energy. This is where they get their life. They are repeatedly refreshed by it, especially during sleep, and this is how they regenerate themselves. Nonetheless, the elementals belong to each and every one of the human principles except the *Atman*.”

Meditation thought: Reflect on renewal as a rhythm of life. Let gratitude for rest inform a considerate use of energy.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 325.

“Looked at in this way, elementals may be seen to be close to the essential aspects of a human being, in every one of the senses, on every plane and in every vesture. The human mind has its own elementals, which one may call mental elementals if one likes, though in fact they are airy elementals. On the physical plane, man has mostly earthy elementals. Within each principle, there are further subdivisions, so that there are earthy-fire elementals, airy-fire elementals and so on. Even this traditional language of the elements is awkward and misleading at best, since the true meanings of these divisions and subdivisions cannot be correlated with merely visual data, much less with the ever-changing atomic language of modern science.”

Meditation thought: Use an image to understand a relationship without forcing it into a literal picture or a scientific claim.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 320.

“To avoid this moralistic delusion and still carry out the work of self-regeneration, one must insert the effort to overcome one's own sins and failings into the most universal context of human suffering. One must feel one's own pain as inseparable from the pain of every atom, every elemental and every human being involved in the collective human pilgrimage. Instead of hiding in fear or withdrawing from it, one must remain sensitive to that universal pain and so become as wide awake as *Buddha*.”

Meditation thought: Let awareness of difficulty make you more attentive to shared suffering and to the practical kindness within reach.