

Jaramarana

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Jaramarana means aging and death. It is the twelfth link of dependent origination, conditioned by *Jati*, birth. Aging includes the weakening of embodied faculties; death marks the dissolution of the living compound. The term belongs to an inquiry into conditioned existence and its suffering. In Theosophical exposition, that inquiry is joined to the distinction between a passing personality and a deeper continuity of consciousness. Its human purpose is to help us meet impermanence with clearer understanding and more considerate care.

H.P. Blavatsky's *Theosophical Glossary* defines *Jarâmarana* as "decrepitude and death, following the maturity of the *Skandhas*." This definition is central. The *Skandhas* are the bundles of finite attributes that make up the personality. They gather at birth, become active through life, mature through experience, weaken with time, and separate at death. Thus *Jaramarana* is not the annihilation of the spiritual individuality. It is the dissolution of a karmically assembled compound.

This distinction sets Blavatsky's account apart from the idea that the personality persists unchanged. The spiritual value of a life is gathered and assimilated within a wider continuity. That is a Theosophical teaching, not a conclusion contained simply in the Buddhist definition of aging and death. Preserving the distinction lets the reader contemplate both the passing of a familiar form and the metaphysical meaning given to it by the sources.

Because *Jaramarana* follows *Jati*, mortality belongs to the condition of birth. Understanding that relation does not make bereavement less painful or a short life less precious. Doctrine should make room for sorrow rather than pronounce it philosophically unnecessary. Within the limits of embodiment lies the opportunity to learn, care and offer what one can. Remembering those limits may give an ordinary day greater seriousness without requiring a mood of alarm.

Professor Iyer gives the right tone for this meditation. In *The Gupta Vidya* he recalls the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* that true wisdom includes meditation upon birth, death, decay, sickness, and error. He also writes that to meditate on death is to meditate on life. This is not morbidity. It is the sober placement of human experience within the total continuum. Death is not an isolated event at the end of life. It is a teacher moving quietly through every stage of life.

Jaramarana can make perception more compassionate. Every embodied being is ageing. Every person one meets is vulnerable to loss, separation, illness, and death. This recognition can soften harsh judgment without weakening discrimination. A difficult person is still a mortal being. An

old person is not a failed young person, but a soul in a later phase of embodiment. A dying person is not merely disappearing, but entering a profound transition within a lawful universe. Such recognition gives practical meaning to Universal Brotherhood.

The term also changes speech. If all beings are mortal, then words matter. Harsh speech may burden a consciousness already struggling under time and sorrow. Healing speech may steady another being at a decisive moment. Professor Iyer repeatedly points toward the therapeutics of speech and the magic of selfless action. *Jaramarana* intensifies that teaching. Since time is short, speech should become more truthful, measured, and compassionate.

Age can be a time of continuing learning, recollection and gratitude. In “The Eye of Shiva,” Professor Iyer honours older people who remain willing to learn and prepare their mental luggage for another incarnation. This possibility dignifies age without making usefulness a condition of dignity. A person who can no longer study, remember clearly or act independently remains fully deserving of patient companionship and care.

Yet *Jaramarana* is not an excuse for passivity. Professor Iyer warns that many die discovering that they had hardly lived, and that what they called life may be known to Adepts as living death. Biological survival is not spiritual aliveness. One may be active, entertained, and successful while inwardly asleep. Conversely, one may be outwardly ordinary and physically limited while inwardly preparing a future of learning. The term asks each person to become more awake while there is still time.

Professor Iyer cites a teaching attributed to Plotinus about two deaths: bodily dissolution and the philosopher’s inward release from domination by corporeal passions. The second is a metaphorical and contemplative discipline within life. It means relinquishing possessiveness, false identity and unexamined attachment; it does not mean bringing about bodily death. The point is to live more freely and responsibly while the opportunity of embodiment remains.

This voluntary death is not self-hatred. It is self-clarification. The false self does not need to be violently attacked; it needs to be seen through. The student learns to release exaggerated claims, rigid self-images, possessive memories, and the wish to make impermanent things permanent. Something finite is allowed to end, and something more spacious becomes possible.

This is how *Jaramarana* helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. The lower mind clings to personality and says, “This is mine; this is me; this must continue.” *Buddhi* illumines relation, compassion, and truth. When *Manas* sees the inevitability of ageing and death, it may contract in fear or expand in wisdom. It may widen its concern and ask what can be purified, offered, learned, and carried forward.

A practical application is to slow a visit to the pace of the person receiving it. One may be tempted to complete the conversation, correct every repetition or supply a reassuring doctrine. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception includes the other person's fatigue, preferences, beliefs and need to be heard. Asking what would be helpful may lead to a small task, a remembered story or quiet company. Mortality then teaches attention through the person before us.

The same attention is needed after a death. Grief changes unevenly, and affection cannot be measured by how quickly tears end. A friend may need practical help long after public condolences have ceased. Remembering an anniversary, sharing a task or speaking the loved one's name can acknowledge a continuing relationship without making claims about experiences we cannot verify. Human Solidarity becomes steady companionship when it allows sorrow its own pace.

There is also stewardship here. Bodies, relationships, communities, cultures, and ecosystems all pass through growth, maturity, decline, and dissolution. *Jaramarana* teaches reverent care for the field of life, not because forms can be made permanent, but because they can be treated wisely while they are entrusted to us. A civilisation that forgets death becomes shallow; a civilisation that worships death becomes destructive. A wiser civilisation remembers death in order to protect life.

The wider teaching of reincarnation presents learning as extending beyond one personality. That perspective can sustain hope, while present care must still respond to actual needs. No spiritual explanation should be required as the price of receiving tenderness. A person's beliefs about death may differ from ours; listening faithfully to those beliefs is itself an expression of reverence for the life being lived.

Jaramarana asks the student to meditate until fear becomes responsibility. One need not pretend to be fearless. The human heart trembles before loss, and that trembling should be treated with kindness. But fear can become gratitude for the present opportunity. It can become tenderness toward all who suffer. It can become a vow to live more consciously, speak more truthfully, serve more steadily, and prepare more quietly.

Jaramarana is not merely the shadow at the end of life. It is the hidden teacher beside every breath. It says that all compounded things will pass; therefore, use the passing form for compassion, wisdom, service, self-knowledge, and the quiet preparation of the soul. Then ageing becomes instruction, death becomes transition, and human life becomes a sacred opportunity within the vast pilgrimage of consciousness.

Glossary

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

Adepts — Those who have attained advanced spiritual knowledge and discipline in the Theosophical tradition.

Aggregates — The changing factors through which personal experience is analysed; see *Skandhas*.

Atman — The universal Self or spiritual principle; also written *Atma*.

Becoming — Conditioned arising and continuation; *Bhava* is its particular use within dependent origination.

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

Catenated — Linked in a connected series; used of the causal relations among the *Nidanas*.

Concatenation — A linking together of factors or events, especially in a causal sequence.

Conditioned — Dependent upon causes, circumstances, limits or relations; contrasted with the unconditioned.

Corporeal — Pertaining to the physical body; corporeal passions are attachments associated with bodily experience.

Dependent Origination — The Buddhist teaching that conditioned existence and suffering arise through interdependent causes; the Twelve *Nidanas* give a standard twelvefold exposition.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relationships, circumstances and responsibilities omitted by an isolated personal view.

Ego — A centre of self-reference; Theosophy distinguishes the enduring spiritual individuality from the temporary personal ego.

Gupta Vidya — Secret or esoteric wisdom; also the title of the collected essays of Professor Raghavan N. Iyer.

Hinayana — A historical and contested designation for Buddhist teachings seeking liberation; spelled *Hīnayāna* in the quotation. Its appearance preserves the source's terminology.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity, vulnerability and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility.

Individuality — The enduring spiritual Ego in the Theosophical account, distinguished from its successive personalities.

Jamarana — Aging and death; the twelfth link, conditioned by birth. *Jarāmarana* and *jarāmarana* are alternate spellings used in the sources and discussion.

Jati — Birth; the eleventh link in dependent origination. *Jāti* and *Jāti* are alternative spellings.

Karma — The law of ethical causation and adjustment; actions and motives bear consequences within a wider order.

Manas — The thinking principle in Theosophy; its higher spiritual individuality is distinguished from the personal ray. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

Manu — Thinking being or thinker; used in the quoted passage for the Ego released from the burden of physical life.

Meta-psychological — Pertaining to an account of consciousness that reaches beyond ordinary personal psychology.

Nidana — A causal link or condition; the Twelve *Nidanas* describe the arising of conditioned existence. *Nidāna* is a historical spelling.

Nirvana — Liberation from the bondage sustained by ignorance and craving; *Nirvāna* is an older spelling.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories and roles of one life, distinguished from the enduring individuality in Theosophy.

Puck and Prospero — Shakespearean figures from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, used by Professor Iyer to evoke contrasting roles in a longer pilgrimage.

Reincarnation — Successive embodiment; in Theosophy, the continuing pilgrimage of the spiritual individuality through distinct personalities.

Skandhas — The aggregates or changing factors of personal experience. *Skandha* is the singular; historical Theosophical translations of the factors differ from current Buddhist terminology.

Spiritual individuality — The enduring spiritual centre in the Theosophical account, distinguished from the passing personality.

Universal Brotherhood — The spiritual kinship of beings, expressed through care extending beyond personal or sectarian boundaries.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, "Nidâna", *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 231.

"*Nidâna* (Sk.). The 12 causes of existence, or a chain of causation, 'a concatenation of cause and effect in the whole range of existence through 12 links'. This is the fundamental dogma of Buddhist thought, 'the understanding of which solves the riddle of life, revealing the insanity of existence and preparing the mind for Nirvâna'."

Meditation thought: The chain supplies a wider setting for aging and death. Its historical language expresses a doctrine of liberation; it need not become contempt for the finite life entrusted to care.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 79.

"Whether a great or an average sinner, good or bad, guilty or innocent, once delivered of the burden of physical life, the tired and worn-out *Manu* ('thinking Ego') has won the right to a period of absolute rest and bliss."

Meditation thought: Rest after the burden of embodied life is part of Blavatsky's Theosophical account. The passage can be contemplated without demanding that another person share its metaphysical assurance.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, "Skandha", *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 304.

"These unite at the birth of man and constitute his personality. After the maturity of these *Skandhas*, they begin to separate and weaken, and this is followed by *jarâmarana*, or decrepitude and death."

Meditation thought: The gathering and weakening of the aggregates describe the personality's impermanence. The source's account should deepen attention to a vulnerable person, not reduce that person to declining faculties.

4. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 39.

"The twelve *Nidanas* or causes of being. Each is the effect of its antecedent cause, and a cause, in its turn, to its successor; the sum total of the *Nidanas* being based on the four truths, a doctrine especially characteristic of the *Hînayâna* System. They belong to the theory of the stream of catenated law which produces merit and demerit, and finally brings Karma into full sway."

Meditation thought: Aging and death are situated within relations of cause and effect. Seeing the larger pattern can give present choices seriousness while leaving compassion at the centre.

5. R.N. Iyer, "Reincarnation and Silence", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 239.

"In the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that true wisdom is a meditation upon birth, death, decay, sickness, and error. To meditate upon each of these and all of these together is to begin to know more about the cosmic and the human significance of the truth of reincarnation."

Meditation thought: The meditation joins birth, death and the conditions between them. It asks us to place a single life in a wider field of inquiry and responsibility.

6. R.N. Iyer, "Death and Immortality", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 240.

"To meditate on death is to meditate on life. To ask any question that is significant about the fleeting experiences that come to the ego, bringing pain as well as what appears to be happiness, to understand any of these fleeting experiences, is impossible except in the context of the total continuum. It is indeed difficult for us to understand what it means to put death in its proper place and to consider it in a wider context."

Meditation thought: To consider death is also to reconsider the use of life. A wider perspective may make an ordinary hour more available for learning, reconciliation or companionship.

7. Passage attributed to Plotinus in R.N. Iyer, "Death and Immortality", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 240.

"The Soul is bound to the body by a conversion to the corporeal passions; and is again liberated by becoming impassive to the body. That which Nature binds, Nature also dissolves; and that which the Soul binds, the Soul likewise dissolves. Nature, indeed, bound the body to the Soul; but the Soul binds herself to the body. Nature, therefore, liberates the body from the Soul; but the Soul must liberate herself from the body. Hence there is a two-fold 'death'; the one, indeed, universally known, in which the body is liberated from the Soul; but the other, peculiar to philosophers, in which the Soul liberates herself from the body. Nor does the one entirely follow the other."

Meditation thought: The epigraph is attributed to Plotinus in Professor Iyer's essay. Its philosophical death concerns inward detachment within life, distinct from bodily death and never a direction to bring it about.

8. R.N. Iyer, "The Fire of Purgation", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 354.

"They become prisoners of the external, shifting panorama of human existence, and thereby become victims of history. When they die, they discover they had hardly lived, and in many cases what they called life is what is known to Adepts as living death. But those who are able to transcend the imagery of their immediate perceptions, the narrow horizon of their conceptions of space, time and motion, can think causally in terms of the cosmos and humanity."

Meditation thought: A busy life can still leave its deeper purposes unattended. The question belongs to self-examination, not to judging the inward worth of someone whose capacities have become limited.

9. R.N. Iyer, "The Fire of Purgation", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 355.

"The key is to do in life that which one can scarcely do after death (except in an extremely limited sense) and to prepare oneself for future lives of learning. The secret mysteries of consciousness which underlie the meta-psychological evolution of mankind will remain unspoken to the vast majority of human beings for ages to come."

Meditation thought: Preparation begins in the life being lived. An honest correction or a patient act of service can matter even when the larger mysteries remain beyond present knowledge.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Ceaseless Dissolution", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 197.

"A person who starts to see life in this manner knows, as the great sages have taught, that beginnings and endings are unknown and only the middle is evident. Such a person attempts to live without grabbing at the answers of life or demanding that everything be instantly explained, for he sees each life as one night at the theatre. The chain of nights is a long pilgrimage with many roles ranging from Puck to Prospero."

Meditation thought: The theatre image places one life within a longer pilgrimage. It invites patience with what is not yet understood, rather than a demand for immediate explanations of every loss.

11. R.N. Iyer, "Ceaseless Dissolution", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 197.

"Life is no cruel burden imposed upon human beings by some capricious external power, but rather a festival in which there is continual learning and living and loving. But these cannot occur without unlearning, unloving and undoing the excess and illusion of the past. It is a cleansing process of transmission and continuity; it is, ultimately, a great sacrifice."

Meditation thought: Learning involves relinquishment as well as acquisition. Let this thought make room for gratitude and renewal without requiring sorrow to disappear on command.

12. R.N. Iyer, "The Eye of Shiva", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 209.

"Whether one's journey through life carries one over crowded city streets or quiet forest paths, there is no external circumstance of life which negates the possibility of meditation. Neither does the mere passage of years set aside or subvert one's capacity and need to think and learn. There are many old people who, despite advanced age and the force of habit, set an example to the young by calmly demonstrating that they are still willing to learn and still willing to look to the promise of the future."

Meditation thought: The capacity to learn is honoured in old age. Equally, a person's dignity remains when learning or independent action becomes difficult; compassionate care does not depend upon productivity.