

Kama

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Kama is desire: the attraction toward experience, possession, relationship, or continued existence. In the Theosophical account of the human constitution, it belongs to the changing personal nature and can bind thought to what the personality wants. Yet the term has a wider history. H.P. Blavatsky also relates *Kama* to the Vedic impulse toward creation and universal good. These meanings ask for discrimination. The cosmic principle and an ordinary craving are related through a field of symbolism, but they are not interchangeable descriptions.

In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky discusses *Kama* as the feeling that propels toward creation, associated with the primal germ of mind in a Vedic hymn. *The Theosophical Glossary* develops the meaning under *Kamadeva*, describing an all-embracing desire for the welfare of life. This gives the term a scope beyond appetite. Desire can signify a movement toward relation and creative expression. The inquiry must then ask how that movement becomes limited, personalized, and directed toward particular objects in the embodied human being.

Professor Iyer's opening account of *Gupta Vidya* places human *kama* within the lower quaternary. Alongside it are *prana*, the life-current; *linga sharira*, the astral model-body; and *sthula sharira*, the physical frame. This quaternary is distinguished from the enduring triad of *Atman*, *Buddhi*, and *Manas*. *Kama* in this setting is the force of passion and desire. The description concerns its place in the constitution. It does not mean that every wish has the same quality or that the personal nature is incapable of transformation.

The crucial relation is between desire and thought. *Manas* can become so occupied with what is wanted that its reasoning mainly finds ways to justify or obtain it. This association is called *Kama-Manas*. Desire gains the abilities of an intelligent advocate. We can offer persuasive explanations for a preference without having examined its hold upon us. Self-study begins when the thinking power asks what the desire is seeking, what consequences its pursuit involves, and whether the proposed action serves a purpose we can honestly sustain.

Professor Iyer's "Eros and Kamadeva" gives the transformation of desire a particularly rich account. *Manas* has a lower orientation toward *kama* and a higher orientation toward *Buddhi*. When the higher orientation becomes active, the energy of desire can be conserved and offered toward the good of humanity. He describes this through *Agni*, divine fire. The fire is not extinguished into inactivity. Its direction and use are changed through a mind increasingly receptive to spiritual discernment and compassion.

This is the governing image: fire brought into a responsible relation with life. A flame can consume what it touches, yet carefully tended fire can prepare nourishment and give warmth. The difference calls for understanding, attention, and purpose. The image helps us avoid treating energy itself as the sole problem. Much depends upon what directs it and what claims are made in its name. A powerful wish to create or care can serve a generous purpose when its personal demands are examined.

Consider preparing a meal for people we care about. We may enjoy the work and also imagine the appreciation it will receive. Then someone's needs require a simpler menu, or the gathering unfolds differently from the scene we had pictured. Disappointment can reveal how much of the effort had become attached to that picture. The wish to offer something good remains available. We can reconsider what will actually nourish the guests and let the pleasure of preparation serve the people who have arrived.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception includes those people as they are, with needs and preferences that may differ from our own. Human Solidarity can begin in this very ordinary hospitality. The act becomes more generous when the recipients are free to receive it without performing a prescribed gratitude. This does not require denying our disappointment. It means allowing that feeling to be understood without giving it authority over the whole occasion. Desire is being educated by a more inclusive purpose.

The same movement is central to affection. Professor Iyer explicitly allows a place for personal love while asking that it become less possessive and more unselfish. Love develops through particular relationships, but it can gradually release the demand that another person supply our completion. Care becomes more attentive to the other's growth and freedom. This is a demanding discipline precisely because feeling may remain strong. The work concerns the claims attached to feeling and the actions those claims are permitted to direct.

Such transformation requires a measure of freedom from immediate reaction. In "Noetic Self-Determination," Professor Iyer explains that even lower *Manas* can temporarily disengage from *kama* and exercise a limited free will. We can notice a desire without deciding at once either to obey it or to condemn it. The interval allows inquiry. Some wishes can be fulfilled responsibly; some need patience; others ask to be redirected or relinquished. The capacity to make these distinctions grows through use rather than through a single dramatic resolution.

Discernment also asks us to distinguish need from the story built around it. Rest, nourishment, companionship, and meaningful work have their rightful place in embodied life. The spiritual study of *kama* does not make neglect of the human instrument a virtue. It helps us see when a legitimate need becomes entangled with a demand for control, comparison, or recognition. We

can care for the actual need more intelligently when it is no longer required to carry every expectation the personal imagination has attached to it.

The desire for spiritual progress deserves the same honesty. We may begin study from love of truth and gradually become preoccupied with appearing advanced. Meditation can acquire a demand for unusual experiences; service can become a means of being indispensable. These possibilities call for continued observation. An aspiration is strengthened when the personal claim is reduced and attention returns to the purpose that first gave the effort value. The wish to grow then becomes more available to learning, including the corrections learning inevitably brings.

Professor Iyer contrasts coercive self-will with humility, responsiveness, and nonviolence. The contrast provides an ethical test for desire. Are we becoming more capable of hearing another person's reality, or more determined that our own wishes prevail? The question can be asked without turning every difficulty into an accusation. People learn under different conditions and with different burdens. Understanding the pull of desire should make us more patient with human frailty while keeping us clear about the responsibility to avoid imposing harm.

Meditation supports this patience by giving attention a purpose beyond its usual objects of pursuit. The student returns to a universal idea and notices the movements that seek to interrupt it. The process can expose restlessness without requiring a battle against every thought. Desire becomes something that can be observed within a larger awareness. What is learned must then be carried into choices, so that inward quiet contributes to a less possessive use of energy in relationships and work.

The flame can be tended. The wish to possess can be examined, the energy of affection given a wider purpose, and the pleasure of creating joined to care for those who will receive the result. *Kama* becomes a fruitful subject of study when we attend to both its force and its direction. Through *Manas* turning toward *Buddhi*, desire can participate in a more generous life. Its warmth then has somewhere useful to go: into the patient work of nourishing, protecting, and serving what we have learned to love.

Glossary

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

Agni — Fire; in the quoted interpretation, divine fire symbolizes desire transformed toward spiritual purpose.

Agnishwatta Pitris — The solar or spiritual ancestors associated in Theosophy with the awakening of the human mind; contrasted with the *Barhishad Pitris*.

Apology — Plato's account of Socrates' defense at his trial; invoked in the quoted discussion of the philosopher's spiritual standpoint.

Astral — Pertaining to the subtle form or field associated in Theosophy with embodied life and psychic impressions.

Atma-Buddhi — *Atman* together with *Buddhi* as its spiritual vehicle; also called the spiritual Monad. Atma-Buddhic is the related adjective.

Atman — The universal spiritual principle, also written *Atma*; distinguished from the personal sense of self.

Barhishad Pitris — The lunar ancestors associated in Theosophy with the formation of the lower human vehicles; contrasted with the *Agnishwatta Pitris*.

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

Egotism — Self-centered appropriation or assertion. Some older quoted usage qualifies the term to refer instead to higher spiritual self-consciousness.

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.

Ideation — The activity or formative power of thought; in the sources, also the spiritual patterns underlying manifestation.

Immortal Triad — *Atman*, *Buddhi*, and higher *Manas* considered as the enduring spiritual constitution.

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

Kama — Desire or passion in the human constitution; in cosmic symbolism, also an impulse toward creation or universal good. Kamic means pertaining to *kama*.

Kama-Manas — The personal or lower mind in association with desire; also written *kama manas*.

Kamadeva — The deity of love or desire; in Theosophical cosmology, a symbol of an all-embracing creative desire for universal good.

Linga Sharira — The astral model-body or subtle vehicle associated with physical embodiment; also written *linga sarira*.

Lower Manas — The personal or projected ray of mind, working through embodied faculties and capable of association with desire or guidance from higher understanding.

Lunar and solar — Symbolic terms for the lower reflected and higher illuminating orientations of mind in these passages.

Mahat — Universal Mind or cosmic intelligence. Mahat-mic is a related adjectival form used for this higher intelligent element.

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.

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.

Overbrooding — Spiritually presiding over or illuminating a lower vehicle without being fully expressed through it.

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

Phaedo — Plato's dialogue on the soul and the philosopher's preparation for death, invoked here in a discussion of spiritual disengagement.

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

Prana — The life-current or vital principle energizing embodied existence.

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

Quaternary — A group of four; here, the lower human principles of desire, vitality, astral model-body, and physical body.

Renunciation — Relinquishment of selfish claims or attachment, so that thought and action can serve a wider purpose.

Rig Veda — An ancient collection of Vedic hymns; the quoted account of creative desire refers to its hymn 10.129.

Silent Spectator — Professor Iyer's designation for the higher witnessing intelligence and source of spiritual self-conscious will.

Sthula Sharira — The physical or gross body in the sevenfold human constitution; also written *sthula sarira*.

Theurgy — The altruistic application of spiritual wisdom in the sense used by Professor Iyer.

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. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — "The Gupta Vidya" — p. 9

"Below this overbrooding Triad is the volatile quaternary of principles drawn from the lower planes of cosmic matter: they are *kama*, the force of blind passion and chaotic desire shared by man with animal life; *prana*, the life-current energizing the whirling atoms on the objective plane of existence; the astral paradigmatic body (*linga sharira*), the original form around which the physical molecules shape themselves, and hence the model for the physical frame (*sthula sharira*). This quaternary of principles is evanescent and changeable, established for man's use at the time of incarnation and dissolved at death into its primary constituents on their corresponding planes."

Meditation thought: The lower quaternary supplies changing instruments for embodied life. Understanding its place can help us care for those instruments while refusing to make every impulse within them the final authority over action.

2. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — "Eros and Kamadeva" — p. 399

"Finite, personal love is not bad in itself but it is frustrating and useless to the human soul unless it can gradually purify and make more impersonal and unselfish the force of *kama* in its material manifestations through the incarnated personality. Only thus can love be transformed from a violent and divisive tendency in human relationships into a non-violent, unifying power that produces strength and peace."

Meditation thought: Personal affection can become a school of less possessive love. Ask how care might support another person's freedom and well-being without demanding that the relationship continually provide personal reassurance.

3. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Eros and Kamadeva” — p. 399

“In *The Secret Doctrine* H.P. Blavatsky gives the key to the transmutation of finite love when she repeats the ancient teaching that *Manas* is dual – lunar in the lower, solar in its upper portion. It is attracted in its higher aspect towards *Buddhi*, the seat of true love and real compassion, but in its lower aspect it descends into and listens to the voice of its animal soul, full of selfish and sensual desires.”

Meditation thought: The mind can serve different directions of desire. Consider whether its reasoning is helping affection become more generous or mainly strengthening the claims that the personality has attached to it.

4. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Eros and Kamadeva” — p. 399

“When the lunar aspect of *Manas* is positive, *kama* in man, like the *Barhishad Pitris*, is possessed of creative fire but devoid of the MAHAT-mic element. When the solar pole of *Manas* is positive, *kama* becomes *Agni* or divine fire and is capable, like the *Agnishwatta Pitris*, of conserving its energy as well as of sacrificing itself to the good and salvation of Spiritual Humanity.”

Meditation thought: The fire imagery concerns transformation of purpose. Energy that would be spent in grasping can be conserved and offered, becoming useful through a mind directed toward the welfare of a larger life.

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Eros and Kamadeva” — p. 400

“When *kama* in man overcomes and enslaves *Manas*, love becomes violent and cunning, or a mere form of sentimental wish-fulfilment. In the former case, it tears the individual to pieces. It becomes a volcanic and tempestuous force, an explosion of all the passions pent up in man; it knows neither law nor restraint and its pressure drives the deepest undercurrents of the animal nature in man to the surface.”

Meditation thought: A strong feeling needs a discerning relation to action. Observe the demand within an impulse and consider its consequences before calling intensity a sufficient reason for another person to comply.

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Noetic Self-Determination” — p. 273

“Even lower *Manas*, when it is disconnected from *kama*, can exercise free will, giving guidance to the mental faculties that make up the personality. This limited application of free will, however, is obviously quite different from full self-determination. The projected ray of *Manas* is the basis of the psychic nature and potentially the organ of free will in physical man.”

Meditation thought: The interval between a desire and its enactment can become a beginning of freedom. Use the personal mind’s capacity to compare and reflect, allowing a wiser alternative to become visible.

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Noetic Self-Determination” — p. 273

“Wherever there is an assertion of the egotistic will, there is an exaggeration of the astral shadow and an intensification of *kama manas*. When the projected ray of *Manas* becomes hard and cold, it tends to become parasitic upon others, taking without returning, claiming without thanking, continuously scheming without scruples.”

Meditation thought: Intelligence can harden around the wish to obtain or control. Examine what is being claimed and what is being returned, so that desire can be brought into a more reciprocal relation with others.

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Noetic Self-Determination” — pp. 273–274

“If, on the other hand, one is becoming humbler and more responsive to others, more non-violent, less assertive and more open to entering into the relative reality of other beings, loosening and letting go the sense of separateness, one is becoming a true apprentice upon the path of renunciation, the path of benevolent magic. The altruistic use of noetic wisdom, true theurgy, is the teaching of *Gupta Vidya*.”

Meditation thought: Responsiveness and nonviolence give desire a different direction. The effort to enter another person’s reality can make care more precise while reducing the demand that the other serve our preferred picture of life.

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Noetic Self-Determination” — p. 274

“The silent Spectator is capable of thinking and ideating on its own. It is capable of disengaging altogether from lower *Manas*, just as lower *Manas* can disengage from *kama*. This skilful process of disengagement is similar to what Plato conveys through Socrates in *Phaedo* and also in the *Apology*. It is a process of consciously dying, which the philosopher practises every moment, every day.”

Meditation thought: The philosophical image of dying refers here to release from compulsive identification. Its purpose is a freer participation in life, in which desire can be observed and a considered response can replace automatic obedience.

10. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume II — p. 176

“For *Kama*, again, is in the *Rig Veda* (x. 129) the personification of that feeling which leads and propels to creation. He was the first movement that stirred the One, after its manifestation from the purely abstract principle, to create, ‘Desire first arose in It, which was the primal germ of mind; and which sages, searching with their intellect, have discovered to be the bond which connects Entity with Non-Entity.’”

Meditation thought: *Kama*’s cosmic meaning reaches beyond ordinary appetite. Let the Vedic image preserve the distinction between a principle associated with creative manifestation and the personal wishes through which desire is commonly experienced.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary* — p. 173

“The earlier Vedic description of *Kama* alone gives the key-note to what he emblemizes. *Kama* is the first conscious, all embracing desire for universal good, love, and for all that lives and feels, needs help and kindness, the first feeling of infinite tender compassion and mercy that arose in the consciousness of the creative ONE Force, as soon as it came into life and being as a ray from the ABSOLUTE. Says the *Rig Veda*, ‘Desire first arose in IT, which was the primal germ of mind, and which Sages, searching with their intellect, have discovered in their heart to be the bond which connects Entity with non-Entity’, or *Manas* with pure *Atma-Buddhi*.”

Meditation thought: The *Kamadeva* passage presents a desire embracing the welfare of life. This gives personal aspiration a direction: to widen the concern carried by our energy, rather than merely increasing its force.

12. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Eros and Kamadeva” — p. 400

“Such love can only arise when *kama* is under the influence, even if intermittently, of a *Manas* that tends upwards to *Buddhi*. This love is silent rather than clamorous in its expression, marked by inward depth rather than by outward display. The silences of love lie in wait for us, night and day, at our threshold, and those who have loved deeply in this way come to learn many secrets that are unknown to others, the secrets of sharing and sacrifice and duty well done.”

Meditation thought: A quieter affection can become more attentive to what is actually needed. The work of sharing and a faithfully fulfilled duty may express love more fully than the display through which we wish it to be recognized.