

Life Atoms

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Life-atoms are living centres or carriers through which the One Life is expressed in the innumerable forms of Nature. In Theosophical teaching they bear energy, affinity, memory and response, participating in the building, sustaining and dissolution of embodied existence. The term belongs to an occult account of life and consciousness. It is broader than the atom of chemistry, and its meaning cannot be established simply by attaching the word living to a physical particle. It asks us to contemplate the inward continuity of what appears outwardly separate.

H.P. Blavatsky distinguishes life-atoms from sleeping-atoms through activity and latency. Both are related to the same universal life. A dormant possibility has not become absolute nothingness, and an active form does not contain the whole of the life expressed through it. This distinction introduces a rhythm central to the teaching: forms emerge, endure, change and dissolve, while life continues through those transformations. What appears as an ending from the standpoint of one arrangement may belong to a more extensive process of renewal.

The Secret Doctrine presents even what is called inorganic matter as participating in life. Mountain and daisy, human being and ant are composed of innumerable lives. This is a metaphysical proposition about Nature, rather than a claim that every constituent thinks as a person does. Consciousness and responsiveness have different degrees and modes. The doctrine preserves those distinctions while rejecting an ultimate division between a living realm and matter wholly outside universal life.

Life-atoms are described as both builders and destroyers. Their work cannot be measured only by the permanence of a particular body or structure. Aggregation gives form; separation makes other arrangements possible. The image of a garden can help us contemplate this rhythm. Fallen leaves return to a soil from which new growth emerges. This familiar process illustrates renewal without proving the occult account of its agents. It can nevertheless educate gratitude for a continuity whose usefulness extends beyond the preservation of what we presently prefer.

The human constitution is one field of this activity. Theosophy speaks of vestures, the bodily and subtler instruments through which consciousness operates. These instruments are impressionable. Professor Iyer relates their life-atoms to the quality of thought, motive, breath and speech. In "Consciousness and Existence," he describes how craving and the separative sense of self establish recurring grooves in the lower nature. The Sanskrit terms *tanha* and

ahankara name these tendencies toward thirst and I-making. Repetition gives them a persistence that a new opinion alone may not overcome.

This explains the emphasis upon reeducation. A person may recognize an unjust response and still feel its familiar pressure when challenged. The doctrine places such difficulty within a field shaped over time. Recognition opens the work; sustained practice gives it continuity. In “Self-Magnetization,” Professor Iyer asks for courageous attention to established tendencies and the deliberate strengthening of countervailing ones. His concern is with a renovation of the instruments of consciousness, rather than a passing change of mood.

Suppose a household has acquired a habit of greeting every mishap with blame. A broken cup brings accusation before anyone asks whether a hand was hurt. One member begins to change that order: attend first, discover what happened, then decide what needs correction. The new response must be repeated when tiredness makes the old one attractive. Over time, others may find it easier to speak honestly. This is a modest illustration of reeducation: the atmosphere changes through acts that become dependable, not through a single declaration that everyone should be kinder.

The illustration does not make life-atoms an explanation for every difficulty. Their metaphysical meaning should not be used to guess the hidden causes of another person’s circumstances. It directs scrutiny first toward the conduct within our own responsibility. Patience is needed because habits have histories, because understanding develops unevenly, and because a new response must find expression through imperfect instruments. A lapse can be examined and repaired without denying the value of previous effort.

Blavatsky also connects life-atoms with heredity, affinity and reincarnation. Her account describes some as transmitted through bodily descent and others as drawn again toward the same individuality under karmic law. This belongs to the historical esoteric explanation of continuity across lives. It does not supply a biological test or a means of assigning someone’s destiny from their ancestry. Its philosophical concern is that embodied life retains relationships and tendencies beyond the brief interval that personal memory can survey.

Life-atoms should also be distinguished from the spiritual individuality with which they become associated. The doctrine describes a relation between the continuing pilgrim and the changing constituents of its instruments. It does not dissolve the thinker into a crowd of particles, nor make the instruments independent of the purposes repeatedly impressed upon them. This relationship helps explain the seriousness of deliberate choice. A person works through conditions already formed, yet can begin to introduce a different direction into them. Continuity makes change difficult, but also gives sustained effort a field in which to take root.

Professor Iyer gives this continuity an ethical scope. In his treatment, thought, breath and speech affect many lives, and inward activity contributes to a field shared with others. Human Solidarity therefore reaches into the use of attention itself. A contemptuous interpretation can prepare harsh conduct; a fair account can make cooperation possible. The teaching asks us to consider the quality of what we send into circulation, including the judgments repeated in conversation and the expectations imposed upon those who are learning.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes the question from how a mood affects me to what kind of environment my response helps create. The household example widens into a workplace, a school, a neighborhood. It also extends toward the nonhuman lives involved in food, shelter and daily labor. Reverent stewardship becomes more concrete when we remember the many contributions sustaining an ordinary day. Resources can be used carefully, waste reduced, and the work of others acknowledged with greater accuracy.

The relation between *Manas* and *Buddhi* gives this care a spiritual direction. *Manas* can organize desire and defend its demands, but it can also become receptive to a more universal discernment. Professor Iyer describes the refinement of subtle instruments through concentrated thought and spiritual will. His musical analogy is helpful: an instrument must become responsive, while the purpose and skill of its use also matter. A finer instrument alone does not determine whether the music will serve something generous.

Meditation, self-study and useful action consequently belong together. Reflection can disclose a tendency; practice can introduce a better response; service can prevent inward work from closing around personal improvement. The garden image returns here with patience. Cultivation requires attention to conditions, repeated care and respect for processes that cannot be commanded into instant completion. One works with the field as it is, while keeping faith with the possibilities it may support.

Life-atoms finally invite a more responsible sense of belonging. The forms entrusted to us participate in a life exceeding our separate aims. To contemplate that teaching is to become more careful with the instruments of thought and speech, more patient in reforming habit, and more grateful for the lives through which our own life proceeds. The work begins close at hand, wherever a familiar reaction can give way to a clearer and more considerate act.

Glossary

Absolute — The unconditioned Reality, beyond the limitations and distinctions of manifested existence.

Ahankara — The I-making principle; the sense of separate selfhood when consciousness identifies with its changing instruments.

Arhat — One who has attained an advanced degree of spiritual realization; Rahat is a related form used in the source.

Astral — Pertaining to a subtle plane or vehicle, particularly the formative pattern underlying physical embodiment.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or faculty of intuitive discernment; Buddhic means pertaining to it.

Buddhi-Akasha — Professor Iyer's expression relating spiritual discernment and ideation to the subtle field through which purification is described.

Crore — Ten million; used in the source to convey immense numbers of lives.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include more relationships, consequences and the needs of others.

Elementals — Lives or forces of Nature associated with the formation and activity of the lower instruments; their functions differ from human self-consciousness.

Esoteric — Pertaining to an inward or occult interpretation of a teaching, distinguished from its outward formulation.

Fiery lives — A class of lives described by Blavatsky as builders and destroyers within an occult account of the renewal of forms.

Great Breath — A symbol of the cyclic manifestation and withdrawal of universes.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

Incarnation — The embodiment of an enduring principle or individuality in a particular life.

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

Life-atoms — Living centres or carriers of universal life, associated in Theosophical teaching with energy, affinity, memory and the formation of vestures.

Manas — The self-conscious thinking principle; in its higher sense, the reincarnating individuality. Manasic means pertaining to this principle.

Manasaputras — Sons of Mind; spiritual intelligences associated with the awakening of *Manas* in humanity. *Manasaputra* is the singular.

Manifestation — The expression of differentiated existence from a subtler or unmanifest condition.

Monad — The spiritual unit or pilgrim, commonly related to *Atma-Buddhi*; its essential unity is distinguished from the changing vehicles through which evolution proceeds.

Occult — Concerned with hidden principles and laws in the Theosophical account; occultism is the related field of inquiry.

One Life — The universal unity of life underlying and expressed through the many lives and forms of Nature.

Plastidule — A hypothetical living particle in Haeckel's historical biological speculation, discussed critically by Blavatsky; plastidular is the adjective.

Prana — The life-principle or vitality active in embodied existence.

Reincarnation — The return of the enduring individuality through successive lives within the Theosophical account of evolution.

Self-consciousness — The capacity to reflect upon one's own experience, intention and action; the sources distinguish personal and more universal degrees.

Tanha — Thirst or craving, particularly the impulse toward grasping and continued separative experience.

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

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. II, p. 672.

"We know and speak of 'life-atoms' — and of 'sleeping-atoms' — because we regard these two forms of energy — the kinetic and the potential — as produced by one and the same force or the one life, and regard the latter as the source and mover of all. But what is it that furnished with energy, and especially with memory, the 'plastidular souls' of Hæckel? The 'wave motion of living particles' becomes comprehensible on the theory of a Spiritual one life, of a universal Vital principle independent of our matter, and manifesting as atomic energy only on our plane of consciousness."

Meditation thought: Activity and latency are understood as modes of one life; neither exhausts its possibility.

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. II, pp. 671–672.

“The latter (Occultism) teaches that — (a) the life-atoms of our (*Prâna*) life-principle are never entirely lost when a man dies. That the atoms best impregnated with the life-principle (an independent, eternal, conscious factor) are partially transmitted from father to son by heredity, and partially are drawn once more together and become the animating principle of the new body in every new incarnation of the Monads. Because (b), as the individual Soul is ever the same, so are the atoms of the lower principles (body, its astral, or life double, etc.), drawn as they are by affinity and Karmic law always to the same individuality in a series of various bodies, etc., etc.”

Meditation thought: Consider the continuity of tendency without reducing a person to heredity or a fixed past.

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 261.

“Not only the chemical compounds are the same, but the same infinitesimal invisible lives compose the atoms of the bodies of the mountain and the daisy, of man and the ant, of the elephant, and of the tree which shelters him from the sun. Each particle — whether you call it organic or inorganic — is a life. Every atom and molecule in the Universe is both life-giving and death-giving to that form, inasmuch as it builds by aggregation universes and the ephemeral vehicles ready to receive the transmigrating soul, and as eternally destroys and changes the forms and expels those souls from their temporary abodes.”

Meditation thought: The passage gives a metaphysical basis for reverence toward the lives composing every form.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 262.

“The ‘fiery lives’ are the seventh and highest subdivision of the plane of matter, and correspond in the individual with the One Life of the Universe, though only on that plane. The microbes of science are the first and lowest sub-division on the second plane — that of material *prâna* (or life). The physical body of man undergoes a complete change of structure every seven years, and its destruction and preservation are due to the alternate function of the fiery lives as ‘destroyers’ and ‘builders.’”

Meditation thought: The seven-year account belongs to this historical occult text; its contemplative theme is renewal through construction and dissolution.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Consciousness and Existence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 42.

“Instead of placing one's reliance upon ultimately ephemeral forms, no matter how abstract, one should awaken and strengthen a sense of spiritual solidarity with the Great Breath. To begin to become attuned to the Great Breath in consciousness means reeducating all aspects of one's being. This demands much time and hard work owing to the vast numbers of miseducated life-atoms in one's vestures. Through *tanha* and *ahankara*, masses of these miseducated elementals conjoined with brain electricity have left astral grooves, memories of mortality and insufficiency, of limitation and finitude. Because of this fragmentation and discontinuity of consciousness, one constantly tends to look outside oneself for that upon which one may rely.”

Meditation thought: Patient reeducation of habit begins when reliance shifts from a passing mood to a steadier spiritual purpose.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Self-Magnetization”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 185.

“But if one makes the effort with total trust in the law of cycles, and does this sufficiently often, it will begin to happen naturally. Then it will wear away the old tendencies until they fall away, and a refreshed class of life-atoms will become a permanent component of one's vestures.”

Meditation thought: A countervailing practice gains strength through repetition; renewal asks more than a moment of resolve.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Self-Magnetization”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 185.

“There are so many life-atoms involved in the vestures that every day through thought, breath and speech, one charges enough life-atoms to affect many lives. It is absurd to try, on the basis of some narrow span of illusory time, to blame all one's ills upon a single lifetime. One must, at some point, penetrate to the causal level, and mentally cleanse one's sense-perceptions.”

Meditation thought: Let the wider effects of thought and speech enlarge responsibility without becoming a claim to know the causes of another person's suffering.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Self-Magnetization”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 185.

“To understand how Manasic concentration of *Buddhi-Akasha* can purge and purify the lower vestures, one must grasp the correlative action of thought upon the fiery lives of the lower vestures as they alternate in their function of building and destroying ...”

Meditation thought: Reflection can inquire how the direction of mind affects the instruments through which it works.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Continuity and Choice”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 286.

“One day it could have meaning for us to say that we actually choose our thoughts and life-atoms, that we have not one reaction which is not submitted by us to the process of deliberation. Then many more shall be worthy of the most sacred of all titles in collective evolution, of being what Emerson called Man Thinking, a *Manasaputra*, a trustee of the sacred fire of individual and universal self-consciousness, with ‘the priceless boon of learning truth, the right perception of existing things, the knowledge of the non-existent.’”

Meditation thought: Freedom becomes more responsible as deliberation reaches the reactions usually left to habit.

10. H.P. Blavatsky, quoted by R.N. Iyer — “Self-Transformation”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 287.

“‘The worlds, to the profane,’ says a Commentary, ‘are built up of the known Elements. To the conception of an *Arhat*, these Elements are themselves collectively a divine Life; distributively, on the plane of manifestations, the numberless and countless crores of lives. Fire alone is ONE, on the plane of the One Reality: on that of manifested, hence illusive, being, its particles are fiery lives which live and have their being at the expense of every other life that they consume. Therefore they are named the ‘DEVOURERS.’”

Meditation thought: Forms arise through many lives; gratitude may accompany the ordinary use of what sustains us.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Degrees of Enlightenment”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 108.

“... to be able to free the spiritual will is to reduce and refine, to concentrate and reshape matter, so that one becomes less involved with gross life-atoms and more capable of dealing with the most sensitive, refined and supersensuous life-atoms. These in turn are capable of responding as naturally and as reliably to the spiritual will as a fine musical instrument to the hands of a master.”

Meditation thought: The musical analogy joins refinement of the instrument with the purpose and skill of its use.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Self-Magnetization”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 184.

“Rather, one must resolve to spend a number of years establishing and strengthening countervailing tendencies, recognizing old tendencies when they come, and counteracting them with deft precision. Robert Crosbie suggested that as soon as one discerns a mood or tendency which is deleterious, one should immediately think of the opposite. Ineffectually thinking of the opposite, and being unable to do anything when the challenge has already come to full flower, is like refusing to treat a disease when its initial symptoms appear. It is precisely when a tendency from the past first registers in awareness that one must act calmly.”

Meditation thought: Recognize a harmful tendency early enough to give a wiser response room to develop.