

Namarupa

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Namarupa means name-and-form. In Buddhist dependent origination it concerns the mental and bodily factors of experience; in Theosophical exposition it also denotes the named and formed personality. These related meanings should not be narrowed to a person's name and physical appearance. The term asks how a living field of experience becomes organized, and how consciousness may mistake that organization for its whole identity. Its practical invitation is to use the personality faithfully while loosening the conviction that our familiar description exhausts who we are.

H.P. Blavatsky defines *Nâmarûpa* as personality, a form with a name to it, and the symbol of the unreality of material phenomenal appearances. This does not mean that appearances do not exist at all. It means that appearance, when mistaken for final reality, is unreal. Name-and-form belongs to the world of manifestation and *Maya*. It is relatively real as an instrument and field of experience, but false when taken as the immortal Self.

In the usual forward sequence of the Twelve *Nidanas*, *Namarupa* is the fourth link, conditioned by consciousness and conditioning the six sense-bases. Here "name" includes mental functions, rather than merely the words used to label things. "Form" concerns material embodiment. *The Gupta Vidya* glossary accordingly gives *nama* as mind and *rupa* as form. This technical meaning supplies the background for the wider Theosophical examination of personal identity. A name on a birth certificate is an illustration, not a sufficient definition of the link.

Professor Iyer gives the deepest inward application of the term in "Consciousness and Form". Human beings become alienated from their highest possibilities through identification with grosser forms, concentrated egoity, name and body, conditions and memories, desires and expectations. *Manas* becomes beclouded through identification with *kama*, the sensorium, and the astral form. This is *Namarupa* as lived bondage: consciousness does not merely have a name and form; it becomes fascinated by them, enclosed by them, and defended through them.

Namarupa works through language. A child receives a name and gradually gathers around it praise, blame, comparison, fear, ambition, family story, social identity, and private drama. A form is also useful; without embodiment the human soul could not learn the lessons of incarnation. But form becomes binding when its sensations, beauty, weakness, age, pain, and pleasure become the measure of selfhood. The name says "this one"; the form says "here"; desire says "mine"; ignorance says "this is what I am."

Professor Iyer's instruction is practical: one must deliberately withdraw from identification with name and form through meditation, abstraction, silence, calmness, and negation of the false self. This does not mean hating the body or despising personality. It means not confusing instrument with essence. The body is a field of experience, not the Self. The name is a karmic convenience, not the soul. The personality is a vehicle, not the immortal individuality.

The Key to Theosophy clarifies the distinction between personality and individuality. Personalities shift from birth to birth, while the enduring individuality is compared to the thread on which their experiences are strung. This is the specifically Theosophical account; the Buddhist analysis of *Namarupa* does not itself establish such a permanent Ego. Within Blavatsky's teaching, the temporary personality remains consequential: choices are made through it, tendencies acquire strength, and spiritual qualities contribute to a larger continuity.

The wiser view is therefore neither contempt nor attachment. The mask must be recognized as mask and used responsibly. Name-and-form is entrusted to the soul for learning, service, purification, and contribution. To care for the body without worshipping it, to honor the name without being imprisoned by it, and to fulfill a role without becoming the role are marks of spiritual maturity.

In "Kalahansa and Kalachakra", Professor Iyer teaches that in deepest meditation one empties out all categories, conceptions, and feelings of selfhood, name and form, not only in relation to the body but also in relation to subtler vestures and all possible notions of subjectivity and objectivity. This shows how deep *Namarupa* runs. The gross body is only the beginning. Subtle identity may cling to refined emotion, spiritual image, philosophical concept, mystical experience, or even the idea of being a subject witnessing objects.

"The Nachiketas Flame" gives a devotional image: the complete sacrifice of the *namarupa*, name and form, to the impersonal immortal Self upon the altar of the secret heart. The false self is not to be hated; it is to be offered. When the personality is no longer the center of concern, it can become an instrument of compassion. The body can serve; speech can bless; memory can teach; relationship can become a field of patience; work can become an offering.

In "Spectator and Participant," Professor Iyer warns that habitual patterns gathered around name and form can mimic authentic action. His description of a shadow-play of elementals is an occult account of relinquished responsibility. Its practical challenge is to notice how readily a familiar role can speak and act in our place. Recognizing habit should restore thoughtful participation, not become an excuse for blaming unseen agencies for our conduct.

In ordinary life, *Namarupa* appears when one clings to being respected, clever, wounded, superior, indispensable, or innocent. In work, it appears when the role becomes the self. In

relationship, it appears when another person is forced to orbit one's story. In suffering, it appears when pain becomes identity. Each moment offers an opportunity to recognize the mask without despising the wearer.

A person retiring from years of useful work may discover how closely a title has become joined to self-respect. The loss is real: companionship, daily structure and an avenue of contribution have changed. Spiritual study need not belittle that sadness. It can help distinguish the vanished position from the capacities developed through it. Patience, judgment and care may find new forms of expression, even while the old form is mourned.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means including the people served by that work, the relationships that remain, and possibilities the former role left unexplored. The question changes from how to recover an image to where one's experience may now be useful. Others can assist by addressing the person rather than continually invoking the former title. A wider understanding of identity becomes a practical kindness, especially when illness, retirement or changing family roles have unsettled familiar names.

This recognition deepens Human Solidarity. Every being is more than the name, role, body, history, and wound that appear on the surface. A difficult person is not merely their behavior. A sick body is not the whole being. A social name is not the soul. A failure is not destiny. Such seeing does not deny karma or responsibility; it deepens both.

Namarupa also calls for stewardship. The body and personality are instruments entrusted to consciousness. To neglect them is not spirituality; to idolize them is bondage. Reverent stewardship means caring for the field of incarnation while remembering that it is not the Self.

Name and form can be cared for without being treated as sovereign. A role may be performed well and relinquished when its work is done. A personal history may be remembered without requiring every new relationship to repeat it. The mask becomes more transparent as less effort is spent defending it. Through that transparency, thought, affection and skill become available for a life whose meaning reaches beyond the preservation of an image.

Glossary

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

Antaskarana — The bridge between the personal mind and its higher spiritual source; a spelling used in the quoted passage.

Astral — Pertaining to the subtle formative or psychic dimension described in Theosophical teaching.

Atma-Buddhi — The conjunction of universal spirit and its spiritual vehicle; the higher duad in the Theosophical human constitution.

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

Buddha — An awakened one; in these essays, chiefly Gautama Buddha as teacher of the path beyond suffering.

Cerebration — The activity of thinking, especially the brain-associated processes distinguished from spiritual insight.

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

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

Deus ex machina — Latin for a god from the machine; Olcott uses the theatrical expression figuratively for karma operating through successive personalities.

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.

Egoity — The sense of being an I; its meaning varies with the level and kind of consciousness under discussion.

Elementals — Nonhuman centres or forces of nature in Theosophical teaching; Professor Iyer also discusses their relation to habitual psychic patterns.

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

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

Ideation — The activity or principle of thought; in cosmic contexts, universal intelligence rather than a private mental image.

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

Kama — Desire; in the Theosophical psychological context, the force with which the personal mind may become entangled.

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

Linga Sharira — The subtle or astral form associated with the physical body in the Theosophical constitution.

Mahasmashana — The expression used in the quoted essay for the great sacrificial relinquishment of the personal assemblage; contemplated through the image of the secret heart.

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

Manifestation — Expression through differentiated forms, conditions and relationships.

Maya — The relative and conditioned character of appearances, misleading when mistaken for independent or absolute reality.

Nama — Name or mentality; in the technical explanation of *Namarupa* it includes mental factors, not merely verbal labels.

Namarupa — Name-and-form; mental and bodily factors in dependent origination, and the named personality in Theosophical exposition. *Nāmarūpa* and *Nâmarûpa* are alternate spellings.

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

Noumenon — The underlying reality considered apart from the appearance it presents to a particular observer.

Persona — A mask or social identity; useful as a role but insufficient as an account of the whole being.

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

Phenomenal — Pertaining to appearances and conditioned experience, as distinguished from an ultimate or underlying reality.

Rupa — Form or material embodiment; one of the *skandhas* and the form aspect of *Namarupa*.

Sensorium — The coordinated field or apparatus of sensory awareness.

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

Solicitude — Attentive concern for another person's welfare.

Tanhaically — Through the action of craving or thirst; used by Olcott of the coherence of successive personal aggregates.

Vestures — The bodies or instruments through which consciousness is expressed at different levels in Theosophical teaching.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, "Nidâna", *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 232.

"*Nâmarûpa*, personality, i.e., a form with a name to it, the symbol of the unreality of material phenomenal appearances."

Meditation thought: This is the Glossary's Theosophical use of name-and-form as personality. Relative appearance has practical consequences, though it should not be mistaken for final or independent reality.

2. R.N. Iyer, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 495.

"*namarupa* The fourth link in the chain of twelve *nidanas*; *nama* or mind, and *rupa* or form; see *nidana*."

Meditation thought: The glossary identifies *nama* with mind and *rupa* with form. Remember this broader meaning when a personal name is used as an illustration of the term.

3. R.N. Iyer, "Consciousness and Form", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 119.

"Unless they deliberately take steps to withdraw from identification with name and form (*namarupa*) through meditation, through abstraction and silence, through calmness and negating the illusions of the world and the false self, they will be unable to cooperate with the redemptive function of spirit."

Meditation thought: Withdrawal from identification is an inward discipline. It should make the personality more available for responsible action, rather than justify neglect of the life conducted through it.

4. R.N. Iyer, "Consciousness and Form", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 119.

"Through identification with *kama*, the sensorium and the *linga sharira* or astral form, *Manas* has become beclouded. Therefore, *Atma-Buddhi*, though it is inseparable from pure thought and ideation, pure *Manas* and egoity, overbroods incarnated *Manas* but only at a distance."

Meditation thought: The passage locates obscuration in the mind's identification with desire and its instruments. The inquiry concerns that identification, rather than hostility toward embodiment.

5. R.N. Iyer, "Consciousness and Form", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 119.

"Every human being must discover his true identity by asking, 'Who am I?' He must initially recognize the falsity and absurdity of identifying with any mask or persona. Yet this is precisely the tendency of exteriorized language and lower manasic cerebration."

Meditation thought: A role may be useful without answering the whole question of identity. Notice where a familiar description has become a substitute for examining who is acting and why.

6. R.N. Iyer, "Kalahansa and Kalachakra", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 400.

"When one goes back in the deepest meditation beyond all beginnings and all endings, and does this daily with the whole of one's being — emptying out all categories, conceptions and feelings of selfhood, name and form (*namarupa*), not only in relation to the body and its seeming identity, but also in relation to the subtler vestures and all possible notions of objectivity, and even in terms of all conceivable notions of subjectivity — then one comes closer to the Ever-Existent SELF."

Meditation thought: Name-and-form can attach to subtle concepts of selfhood as well as to the physical body. Let the passage deepen humility about the identities the mind may still defend.

7. R.N. Iyer, "The Nachiketas Flame", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 376.

"At some point one must mentally let go of the route by which one has come, what Gautama Buddha called the Raft and *The Voice of the Silence* terms the *antaskarana* bridge. This letting go is depicted in the image of the complete sacrifice (*mahasmashana*) of the 'assemblage of sins' and the *namarupa* (name and form) to the impersonal, immortal Self upon the altar of the secret heart."

Meditation thought: The offering at the secret heart is a contemplative image of relinquishment. Its purpose is to release possessiveness and make the personality a more faithful instrument of the impersonal Self.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Spectator and Participant", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 315.

"Very few human beings are noetically involved in the processes that ordinarily pass for eating, sleeping, bathing, speaking or making love. A pathetically large proportion of what passes for human life is simply a shadow-play of elementals resulting from human resignation of responsibility. Yet, people are deceived into supposing that they are engaged in meaningful human activity because they have manufactured particular elementals drawn around the *namarupa*, the name and form, which mimic authentic action."

Meditation thought: Professor Iyer's occult description makes responsibility central.

Recognizing an habitual performance should restore deliberate participation, not become a reason to excuse one's conduct.

9. R.N. Iyer, "Spectator and Participant", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 315.

"If, through suffering and solicitude for others, one begins to gain a sense of the magnitude of this dismal delusion, it is natural to want to restore dignity to one's own life through a search for knowledge and for the means of making a genuine contribution to the lives of others."

Meditation thought: Concern for others gives the search for identity a practical direction. A truer life is sought through contribution as well as inward examination.

10. H.S. Olcott, *Buddhist Catechism*, quoted in H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 76.

"The successive appearances upon the earth, or 'descents into generation,' of the tanhaically coherent parts (*Skandhas*) of a certain being, are a succession of personalities. In each birth the PERSONALITY differs from that of a previous or next succeeding birth. Karma, the *DEUS EX MACHINA*, masks (or shall we say reflects?) itself now in the personality of a sage, again as an artisan, and so on throughout the string of births. But though personalities ever shift, the one line of life along which they are strung, like beads, runs unbroken; it is ever that particular line, never any other."

Meditation thought: Olcott's image distinguishes a succession of personalities from the line on which they are strung. Read it as the cited Theosophical exposition of continuity, with its own metaphysical commitments.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 87.

"They are destroyed as the working stock in hand of the personality; they remain as Karmic effects, as germs, hanging in the atmosphere of the terrestrial plane, ready to come to life, as so many avenging fiends, to attach themselves to the new personality of the Ego when it reincarnates."

Meditation thought: The passage describes lower *skandhas* as ceasing to function in one personality while persisting as karmic effects. Impermanence does not make the use of a personality inconsequential.

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

"*Maya* or illusion is an element which enters into all finite things, for everything that exists has only a relative, not an absolute, reality, since the appearance which the hidden noumenon assumes for any observer depends upon his power of cognition."

Meditation thought: Relative appearance depends partly upon the observer's power of cognition. Let that limitation make judgment more careful and allow a person to exceed the name or image first assigned to them.