

Nirguna Brahman

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Nirguna Brahman means *Brahman* without attributes, emphasizing that no quality or predicate can circumscribe the Absolute. *Parabrahm* names this unconditioned Reality; *nirguna* specifies the discipline of refusing to limit it through description. *Saguna Brahman*, by contrast, concerns *Brahman* approached with attributes. The distinction is between standpoints of understanding, not between two independent Absolutes. It asks the student to notice what happens whenever thought turns the Real into an object with recognizable characteristics.

The word *nirguna* means “without qualities.” This does not mean that Reality is blank nothingness. It means that Reality cannot be confined within any finite characteristic. When the mind says “wise,” “beautiful,” “good,” “conscious,” “infinite,” or even “existent,” it has introduced some predicate. Such predicates may be sacred and useful in the realm of *Saguna Brahman*, where *Brahman* is approached through *Ishvara*, devotion, sacred sound, law, and spiritual beauty. But *Nirguna Brahman* is not reached by adding more exalted qualities. It is approached by releasing the mind’s claim to capture Reality through qualities at all.

Professor Iyer develops this distinction in his Theosophical reading of *Vedanta*. He describes *Brahman* without attributes and *Brahman* appearing as with attributes, then distinguishes the highest conceivable deity within manifestation from the Absolute itself. *Ishvara* has meaning in relation to worlds and beings; *Nirguna Brahman* cannot be defined by such relations. This comparative exposition provides a precise basis for the present inquiry without assuming that all Vedantic schools formulate the relation in exactly the same way.

H.P. Blavatsky gives the Theosophical architecture for the same truth. *Parabrahm* is not “God,” because It is not a God. It is the Secondless Reality. It cannot be a cognizer, because cognition requires subject and object. It cannot will or create as a finite being wills or creates, because the Infinite cannot enter into relation with the finite without ceasing, in thought, to be absolute. Therefore *Brahmā*, *Ishvara*, *Mahat*, and the Logos must be understood as relative to manifestation, not as the Absolute in itself.

This does not make the universe worthless. It makes the universe transparent. *Mahat*, cosmic mind, is a phantasm reflected from the Absolute *Nirguna*. The Logos is the first intelligible face of manifestation, the source of individual consciousness and the basis of the subject-side of manifested Being. But even the Logos is not the Absolute. It is a mirror of divine ideation, not the concealed Reality itself.

Professor Iyer deepens this by saying that what *Mulaprakriti* is to *prakriti*, *Nirguna Brahman* is to *Mahat*. *Mulaprakriti* is root-substance, prior to differentiated nature. *Nirguna Brahman* is the attributeless Absolute prior to cosmic mind and manifested ideation. To meditate upon this is to loosen the ordinary habit of identifying reality with objects, extension, duration, sensation, and thought. The apprentice at meditation must begin by considering non-manifestation metaphysically, not as empty absence, but as the mysterious ground of every possible manifestation.

A useful image is the darkness before dawn, provided one remembers its limits. It is not a literal period when *Nirguna Brahman* exists and manifestation does not. Nor is the attributeless a hidden material reservoir out of which the sun is manufactured. The image loosens the habit of identifying reality only with visible outlines. As the forms of a familiar landscape become indistinguishable, one can ask whether the absence of a discernible form necessarily means the absence of reality.

This is why the path toward *Nirguna Brahman* is often described by negation: *neti, neti*, not this, not this. Not body, not emotion, not restless mind, not personality, not memory, not even refined spiritual experience. Not symbol, not doctrine, not light as an object, not silence as an experience. Each negation removes a subtle idolatry. The purpose is not lifeless emptiness, but freedom from false fixation. The student learns not to convert the Real into something the personal mind can possess.

This has ethical consequences. One who takes *Nirguna Brahman* seriously cannot claim to possess ultimate truth privately or sectarianly. Every formulation is partial. Every image is provisional. Every tradition, however sacred, is a vessel, not the shoreless Reality itself. This does not produce indifference. It produces reverence. It teaches exactness without rigidity, devotion without possessiveness, and fidelity without fanaticism.

It also has psychological use. Much suffering arises because the lower mind gives absoluteness to what is relative: an opinion, a role, a wound, a desire, a fear, a success, a failure, or a self-image. *Nirguna Brahman* quietly loosens that spell. It says: not this. Not because these things do not matter at their own level, but because none of them is final. This recognition can make ordinary life more spacious, less reactive, and more compassionate.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception brings this discipline into the way one regards another person. A label may identify a genuine behavior while quietly claiming to define a whole life. A colleague who has made a mistake is more than the mistake; one who has shown exceptional ability is more than an admired talent. Human Solidarity asks that the behavior be addressed without imprisoning the person in a description. This is an ethical implication of the teaching, rather than a claim that finite persons are themselves without qualities.

Nirguna Brahman also purifies devotion. Devotion may begin with *Saguna Brahman*, with *Ishvara* as the approachable divine. But it matures when it becomes transparent to the attributeless. True devotion is not the personal self clinging to a favored image. It is the surrender of self-reference before That which no image can contain. It begins with love of the highest and ends by letting the highest remain immeasurable.

The same is true of knowledge. The intellect can distinguish *Nirguna* from *Saguna*, clarify the relation between *Parabrahm*, *Mulaprakriti*, *Mahat*, and *Logos*, and prevent crude confusion. But the intellect must finally become transparent to *Buddhi*. *Manas* must turn toward a higher intuition, recognizing that Reality is not captured by conceptual mastery. The human task is to become self-determining and self-conscious in relation to the evolutionary process, but that self-consciousness must ripen into humility before the unconditioned.

The practical exercise can begin with a judgment written in a notebook. Read it slowly and distinguish the observed event from the qualities one has assigned to the person involved. Which inference is warranted? Which qualification should be added? What remains unknown? The discipline does not cancel a necessary boundary or a responsible decision. It removes unwarranted finality. A mind willing to correct a small predicate is better prepared to understand why its largest predicates cannot contain the Absolute.

Negation therefore has a precise task. It corrects the application of a limiting category; it does not simply replace every affirmation with its opposite. To say that the Absolute is not a finite being is not to conclude that it is nothing. Being and non-being, when treated as opposing categories, remain within the field being examined. The student must learn to recognize this recurring difficulty without using obscurity as a sign of profundity. Clear distinctions prepare contemplation, even though contemplation cannot be reduced to their verbal arrangement.

Nirguna Brahman leaves the student before the mystery of That which cannot be named. Yet this mystery is not distant. It is nearer than the nearest thought, hidden beneath every appearance, untouched by all change. The mind approaches by negation, the heart by reverence, the will by surrender, and the whole being by becoming transparent. Then *Saguna Brahman*, *Logos*, *Ishvara*, *OM*, wisdom, compassion, and beauty are recognized as luminous thresholds. They guide the soul, and then they bow back into the silence from which they came.

Glossary

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

Attribute — A quality assigned to something; in these essays, any predicate that would limit the Absolute if applied literally.

Bodhisattva — An awakened being devoted to the welfare and liberation of beings; a central ideal of compassionate service.

Brahma — *Brahmā* is the creative deity, distinct from attributeless *Brahman*. The unaccented spelling *Brahma* in a quotation explicitly marked neuter refers to *Brahman* instead.

Brahman — Supreme Reality in Vedantic language; the essays distinguish its attributeless consideration from its approach through divine attributes.

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

Cognition — The act or power of knowing; a cognizer or cogniser is one who knows.

Conditioned — Dependent upon particular limits, relations, causes, or instruments of experience.

Dharmakaya — The vesture of spiritual liberation; *The Voice of the Silence* contrasts its bliss with continued service to humanity.

Differentiation — The emergence of distinct forms, functions, or conditions within manifestation.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening the frame of understanding to include more relations, perspectives, and responsibilities.

Fecundity — Fruitfulness or capacity for abundant generation; used of the inexhaustible possibilities of the ideal cosmos.

Gnana — A spelling of *jnana*, knowledge or wisdom; the quotation also gives the Greek equivalent, *gnosis*.

Gnosis — Greek for knowledge; here spiritual wisdom, paired in the quotation with *Gnana*.

Homogeneous — Of a uniform or undifferentiated nature; contrasted with differentiated or heterogeneous expressions.

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.

Intelligible — Capable of being understood or approached by thought; distinguished from the unconditioned that thought cannot circumscribe.

Ishvara — The divine focus of spiritual aspiration; in Professor Iyer's exposition of Yoga, the special *purusha* untouched by affliction and the resplendent *Saguna Brahman*.

Kosmos — A spelling of cosmos used in the sources for the ordered universe, especially in its ideal or metaphysical aspect.

Logos — The spiritual principle of divine ideation and manifestation; the sources distinguish its unmanifest and active aspects.

Maha Pralaya — The great dissolution or period of cosmic non-manifestation; a cyclic condition, not Absolute Duration itself.

Mahat — Universal Mind or cosmic intelligence; distinguished in these sources from *Nirguna Brahman*, its unconditioned ground.

Mahatma — Great Soul; in this Theosophical usage, an Adept of the highest order, joining spiritual mastery to moral elevation.

Mahayana — The Great Vehicle of Buddhism, emphasizing wisdom and the bodhisattva ideal of compassion for all beings.

Manas — The thinking principle or self-conscious mind; its higher individuality and lower personal ray are distinguished. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

Mandukya — The *Mandukya Upanishad*, invoked in the quotation for the Reality beyond thought and expression.

Manifestation — The expression of reality through differentiated forms, relations, and conditions.

Manvantara — A period of manifested cosmic activity, contrasted with *pralaya*.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental principles and relations of reality beyond immediate appearances.

Mulaprakriti — Pre-cosmic root-substance or root-nature; the veil through which the Absolute is approached and the ground of differentiated nature.

Neti, neti — Not this, not this; the method of negating limiting conceptions without equating the Real with mere nothingness.

Nirguna Brahman — *Brahman* without attributes; *nirguna* emphasizes that the Absolute cannot be circumscribed by any quality or predicate.

Nirmanakaya — The spiritual vesture associated in *The Voice of the Silence* with renunciation of private bliss for service to humanity.

Noumenon — An underlying reality or intelligible ground distinguished from its appearance; noumena is the plural, and noumenal the adjective.

Om — The sacred syllable, also written *AUM*; in the quoted exposition, the sound through which an act is consecrated to the Whole.

Parabrahm — The unconditioned, Secondless Reality, also written *Parabrahman* or *Parabrahmam*; distinguished from every relational expression within manifestation.

Paravara — Supreme and not supreme, or higher and lower; the quoted passage applies the contrast to cause and effect.

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

Phantasm — An appearance or reflected image; in the quoted metaphysical argument, something relatively real rather than independently absolute.

Prakriti — Nature or the field of material and mental transformations; distinguished from *purusha* in *Sankhya* and Yoga.

Predication — The act of assigning a quality or characteristic; a predicate is the quality or statement assigned.

Primordial — Belonging to the earliest or underlying level of manifestation in the metaphysical account.

Prototype — An original or ideal pattern whose expression is unfolded; the cosmic lotus illustrates this relation by analogy.

Rootless Root — A symbolic name for the Absolute as the ground of all manifestation without a prior source of its own.

Saguna Brahman — *Brahman* approached with attributes; *saguna* concerns the divine qualities and relations through which spiritual aspiration gains a focus.

Sambhogakaya — The vesture of spiritual enjoyment or fulfillment; in Professor Iyer's comparative passage, related to *Saguna Brahman*.

Secondless Reality — The Absolute considered without an independent second principle that could limit it.

Subject and object — The perceiver and what is perceived; a central distinction within conditioned consciousness.

Sui generis — Latin for of its own kind; in the quotation, emphasizes the irreducible character of the witnessing Self.

Transcendence — A standpoint or reality exceeding a particular set of limitations; transcendent and transcendental are related forms.

Triad — A grouping of three related principles or aspects; the particular terms of a triad must be identified from context.

Trikaya — The three-vesture doctrine of *Mahayana*: *dharmakaya*, *sambhogakaya*, and *nirmanakaya*.

Trimurti — The Hindu triad of *Brahmā*, Vishnu, and *Shiva*, associated with creation, preservation, and regeneration.

Upanishad — A text of philosophical and spiritual inquiry within the Vedic tradition; *Upanishads* is the plural.

Vedanta — A family of Indian philosophical traditions drawing upon the *Upanishads*; the essays identify Professor Iyer's particular Theosophical interpretation.

Vesture — A sheath or vehicle through which consciousness acts; often used of the temporary human instruments.

Witness — A designation for awareness distinguished from what it observes; the essays caution against imagining a second personality watching from within.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer, "Deity in Action", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 27.

"First of all, absolute unity is beyond infinity as spatial or temporal extension, even if boundless and endless, for it transcends polarization into infinite and finite, unbounded and bounded, which are correlative terms. It is important to grasp this truth fully and clearly, and to assimilate it completely, so that anyone can readily acknowledge the Rootless Root beyond perception and conception, images and ideas, beyond the fleeting and fickle awareness of objects and subjects, and even beyond the Creative Logos, the One Source and Ground of all manifestation."

Meditation thought: Notice which attribute the mind most wants to make ultimate. Let the inquiry distinguish reverence for that quality from a claim that it contains the Real.

2. R.N. Iyer, "Deity in Action", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 27.

"Each and every human being can say truly within the silence of the inmost heart: I am the perceiver, the spectator, the eternal witness, intact and unmodified, attributeless, *sui generis*. I am *Brahman*, *Brahman* am I. I and the Absolute are one, always and forever, in all spaces and conditions and contexts."

Meditation thought: Receive the affirmation as a contemplative standpoint, rather than a certificate of personal attainment. What demand does it place upon the appropriation of experience?

3. R.N. Iyer, "Deity in Action", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 32.

"Similarly, seekers of enlightenment have to recognize and revere the all-potent sap of the Absolute, as well as the inexhaustible fecundity of the ideal Kosmos, potentially present in the Absolute. They must venerate the inconceivable richness and diversity of unique expressions of ideal forms, as well as the ever-expanding and ever-deepening awareness of all the myriad hosts of hierarchies, from the highest and most homogenous to the lowest and most heterogenous, from *manvantara* to *manvantara*. This is what Plato meant by the statement that time is the moving image of eternity. It is a celebration of endless continuity as well as infinite diversity amidst the seeming discontinuities in the realm of appearances."

Meditation thought: The image of common sap joins unity with diversity. How can a shared ground be remembered without overlooking the uniqueness of its expressions?

4. R.N. Iyer, "Deity in Action", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 32.

"The same teaching is also behind the *trikaya* doctrine of *Mahayana*, the three vestures of *dharmakaya*, *sambhogakaya* and *nirmanakaya*. The first corresponds to the state of *nirguna brahman*, the second to the state of *saguna brahman*, and the third to the state of *Mahatmas* and Bodhisattvas, who live in this world, unseen and unknown but ever helpful to all souls who are ready to receive the light of truth, wisdom and compassion. At another level, there is also a similar teaching in regard to the simultaneous triple incarnation of a perfected enlightened being, as a transcendental Buddha, a mediating Bodhisattva, and an incarnated Teacher of Enlightenment. All point to the ineffable, inconceivable and inexpressible Absolute, the supreme, transcendental Source of all light, all life and all love."

Meditation thought: Study the correspondences as Professor Iyer presents them. Let comparison enlarge understanding while preserving the distinct meanings of the terms compared.

5. R.N. Iyer, "The Seventh Principle", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 82.

"In *Vedanta* it is crucial to recognize that subjectivity in its highest sense – quite independent of any notions of incarnated or even disembodied existence – belongs to the highest reality. Therefore, it is also possible in *Vedanta* to think in terms of *Brahman* as giving rise to *Ishvara* or *Brahmā*. Sometimes this is put in terms of a distinction between *nirguna* and *saguna Brahman*, that is, *Brahman* without attributes, but appearing as with attributes."

Meditation thought: Attend to the difference between without attributes and appearing with attributes. What changes when the distinction is understood as one of standpoint?

6. H.P. Blavatsky, quoted in R.N. Iyer, "The Seventh Principle", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 82.

"It must not be thought that the name '*Brahman*' is identical . . . with *Brahmā* or *Ishvara* – the personal God. The *Upanishads* – the *Vedanta* Scriptures – mention no such God, and one would vainly seek in them any allusions to a conscious deity. The *Brahman*, or *Parabrahm*, the ABSOLUTE of the Vedantins, is neuter and unconscious, and has no connection with the masculine *Brahmā* of the Hindu Triad, or *Trimurti*."

Meditation thought: Keep *Brahman* and *Brahmā* distinct while reading. A small difference in a name can mark a large difference in the level of the teaching.

7. R.N. Iyer, "The Seventh Principle", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 83.

"Vedantins who use this language are still aware that the highest Deity imaginable within a scheme of manifestation is itself, in the ultimate sense, merely an appearance or a portion of the Real existing in relation to time and space during a vast period of manifestation. The conception of *Brahmā* or *Ishvara* has meaning in reference to an assemblage of worlds and beings, but it is basically rooted in nothing other than *Parabrahm*. Hence, the distinction between *Parabrahm* and *Ishvara* is relevant to time and what is called creation. It is a distinction helpful in understanding the gestation of a world of differentiated and conditioned existence out of an unconditioned reality."

Meditation thought: Consider a divine conception in relation to worlds and beings. What prevents that relation from serving as a definition of the unconditioned?

8. R.N. Iyer, "Enlightenment", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 239.

"In the abstruse metaphysics of the ancient Hindu schools, it is taught that the Absolute, *Parabrahm*, could be viewed as *nirguna* – attributeless. As soon as one predicates attributes of the Absolute, one has obscured the attributeless Absolute, *Nirguna Brahman*. To remain true to the pure thread of philosophic thought, one must withhold all qualifications and predications of the Absolute. One cannot even say that It was, It is or It will be."

Meditation thought: Write down one predicate you instinctively apply to the Absolute. What limitation enters with it, even when the quality seems supremely noble?

9. R.N. Iyer, "Enlightenment", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 239.

"The apprentice at meditation must begin by considering non-manifestation metaphysically. One must first conceive of the possibility, and then proceed to ponder further questions, which may be resolved through the instruction of the Stanzas. From total non-manifestation, where the Absolute is as much as during a period of manifestation, there is an anticipation of manifestation as a whole. Something analogous to this may be experienced in the early morning hours, in the passage from extreme darkness to a noumenal participation in the progressive dawn. Because embodied human beings are already subjects and objects, minds in forms, they can conceive of this process in two ways: by visualizing *Nirguna Brahman*, the attributeless Absolute, generating the possibility of universal mind, which in turn becomes *Mahat*, the cosmic mind of a particular system; or by visualizing *Mulaprakriti*, primordial pre-cosmic Substance, becoming the noumenon of matter in relation to a sphere of potential existence."

Meditation thought: Use the dawn analogy to question the dependence of thought upon familiar forms. Let the image assist inquiry without turning it into a literal account.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Enlightenment", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 239.

"What *Mulaprakriti* is to *prakriti* – primal Root Substance to noumenal matter – *Nirguna Brahman*, the attributeless Absolute, is to *Mahat* or cosmic mind. To gain any intuition of the profound meaning of this paradigmatic truth, one must meditate upon the early passages from the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, which characterize the long night of non-manifestation – *Maha Pralaya*."

Meditation thought: Hold the two correspondences patiently: root-substance to nature, and the attributeless to cosmic mind. Which distinctions keep the comparison intelligible?

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 6.

“Indeed, if the *Parabrahmam* of the Hindus may be taken as a representative of the hidden and nameless deities of other nations, this absolute Principle will be found to be the prototype from which all the others were copied. *Parabrahm* is not ‘God,’ because It is not a God. ‘It is that which is supreme, and not supreme (*paravara*),’ explains *Mandukya Upanishad* (2.28). It is ‘Supreme’ as cause, not supreme as effect. *Parabrahm* is simply, as a ‘Secondless Reality,’ the all-inclusive Kosmos—or, rather, the infinite Cosmic Space—in the highest spiritual sense, of course.”

Meditation thought: Let the term Secondless interrupt the image of competing ultimate principles. Notice whether the mind immediately rebuilds a boundary under another name.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 62.

“*Mahat*, with the Occultists, the first-born of *Gnâna* (or *gnosis*) knowledge, wisdom or the Logos—is a phantasm reflected from the Absolute *nirguna* (*Parabrahm*, the one reality, ‘devoid of attributes and qualities’; see *Upanishads*); while with some Vedantins *Mahat* is a manifestation of *Prakriti*, or Matter.”

Meditation thought: Even cosmic mind is distinguished from the attributeless. What humility follows when the greatest conceivable intelligence is not treated as the final measure of Reality?