

Prana

Definitional Essay Theosophy Trust

Prana is the life-current of embodied existence. It is the vital energy that animates the lower principles of the human constitution, sustains the astral-physical organism, energizes the whirling atoms of the objective plane, and circulates through the field of living forms. In Theosophy, *Prana* is not merely breath, not merely oxygen, not merely nervous energy, and not merely a poetic name for liveliness. It is a precise principle within the septenary constitution of man.

The term must be understood from the whole before it is divided into parts. *Prana* belongs to the lower quaternary, below the immortal Triad of *Atman*, *Buddhi*, and higher *Manas*. It is established for the use of the incarnated soul during embodiment and dissolves after death into its appropriate plane. This gives *Prana* both dignity and limitation. It is indispensable to embodied life, yet it is not the enduring spiritual individuality.

Professor Iyer's source-field gives a clear formulation: *Prana* is the life-current energizing the whirling atoms on the objective plane of existence. It works through the astral paradigmatic body, the *Linga Sharira*, around which the physical molecules shape themselves. Thus *Prana* is not simply "inside" the physical body in a crude spatial sense. It moves through the astral-physical field, sustaining and refreshing the subtle lives that make embodiment possible.

H.P. Blavatsky's architecture confirms this. In the comparative classifications of human nature, *Prana* appears as "Life," while the *Linga Sharira* is the vehicle of *Prana*. Vedantic language speaks of the *Pranamaya Kosha*, the sheath of vital energy. These correspondences help prevent confusion. *Prana* is neither the gross body nor the spiritual Self. It is the vital current that makes the lower vestures alive and operative.

This distinction is important because modern language often collapses vitality into vague "energy." Theosophy is more exact. *Prana* has relation to breath, but it is not merely respiration. It has relation to oxygen, but it is not merely a chemical gas. It has relation to nervous vitality, but it is subtler than the nervous system. It has relation to desire, but it is not identical with *Kama*. *Prana* is a principle of life-current, working through vehicles and taking moral color from the direction given by consciousness.

The doctrine becomes vivid when Professor Iyer links *Prana* with elementals. All life-energy works through life-atoms, and in human nature this life-current flows like a fluidic current within the astral body. Elementals participate in it as though swimming in an ocean of pranic

life-energy. They are refreshed by it, especially during sleep, and regenerate themselves through it. The body is not a private possession, but a temple inhabited by countless subtle lives.

Vitality and spiritual judgment must be distinguished. A person may have abundant energy and use it carelessly; another may have limited bodily strength and show great discernment. Professor Iyer compares different ways in which the astral nature is animated, drawing attention to cheerful generosity and to obsessional disturbance. The comparison invites examination of how vitality is directed. It does not make physical stamina a measure of wisdom or authorize conclusions about another person's character from the condition of the body.

The difference lies in direction. *Prana* itself is not moral in the same way as self-conscious choice. It is life-energy. But in the human being, life-energy is never far from motive, thought, desire, and speech. When *Manas* is drawn downward into *Kama*, vitality feeds attachment, anxiety, and fragmentation. When *Manas* turns toward *Buddhi*, vitality becomes steadier, clearer, and more available for service.

Professor Iyer's discussion of Gandhi is especially illuminating. Gandhi's soul-force is compared with the atomic noetic force of *Buddhi*, while moral power is linked with the psychic or molecular force of *Prana*, moral perception, and vital energy. This shows the right relation: *Buddhi* must guide *Prana*. Vitality becomes redemptive when used by soul-force for human brotherhood and universal welfare.

The danger is dissociation from the Great Breath. Professor Iyer says selfishness is rooted in the dissociation of human vital energy from its origins in the Great Breath. This is a profound statement. When vitality forgets its source, it becomes self-assertive, anxious, and separative. When it is recollected as a current within the universal rhythm of life, it can become generous, balanced, and consecrated.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception begins by examining what is meant by personal energy. One may first think of *Prana* as personal energy: my breath, my vitality, my health, my power. The Theosophical view widens the circle. *Prana* belongs to the lower constitution, the astral body, the life-atoms, the elementals, the kingdoms of Nature, and ultimately the Great Breath. Personal vitality is a localized current in a vast ocean of life.

The doctrine also illumines speech. If every word is filled with magic, then speech is a pranic act. Words are not empty signs. They carry vitality, intention, tone, and subtle force. Speech can refresh, clarify, and heal, or it can agitate, drain, and poison the atmosphere. To govern *Prana* is therefore also to govern speech. Silence, right breathing, careful language, and benevolent feeling are all modes of pranic responsibility.

Professor Iyer also discusses differentiated currents of *prana* in “Vibhuti Pada,” including *udana*, associated with upward movement. These belong to the traditional account of yogic powers and disciplined mastery of the instruments. Their place in the essay is to show that *prana* has differentiated functions. The ordinary student's work begins with motive, attention and the responsible use of available capacities; a description of extraordinary attainment supplies no shortcut to that preparation.

Here the doctrine becomes inwardly useful. To study *Prana* is to ask: What do I do with the life-current flowing through me? Do I squander it in irritation, anxiety, excess speech, and restless desire? Do I use it to strengthen separateness? Or do I refine it through meditation, measured breath, pure motive, and compassionate action?

The compassionate aspect of *Prana* lies in its universality. All beings live by currents of life. Every creature, plant, animal, and human being is upheld by vitality. Recognizing this softens arrogance. One begins to feel kinship with the field of life. *Prana* becomes a doorway into Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood, not as an abstract ideal, but as the felt fact of shared animation.

This shared vitality also implies responsibility toward the lower kingdoms. The elementals and life-atoms affected by human thought and conduct are part of the evolutionary field. To live carelessly is to disturb the inner ecology of life. To live with reverence is to help purify the currents that pass through and around oneself. *Prana* is therefore connected with custodial responsibility for the field of life.

Suppose a group has promised to complete a shared task. One member may offer enthusiasm yet leave others to finish the details. A quieter member may contribute a smaller amount of work reliably. Stewardship of vitality includes judging one's available strength, making a realistic commitment and allowing time for renewal. The point is to make energy serviceable to a common purpose. Rest and honest limits can belong to that responsibility as fully as exertion does.

The governing image is a current flowing through a temple. If the temple is neglected, the current becomes turbulent and polluted. If the temple is purified, the current becomes clear, steady, and luminous. The purpose is not to worship vitality for its own sake, but to make the life-current a fit servant of the soul.

Prana reminds the student that life is a trust. Breath, speech, feeling, energy, and action are not trivial. They are currents moving through a vast field of visible and invisible beings. To understand *Prana* is to become more careful, not fearfully, but lovingly. The Great Breath moves through all, and in each human being it asks to be received, refined, and returned as blessing.

Glossary

Adept — A person who has attained mastery of occult knowledge; the word alone does not establish the moral use of that mastery.

Aryasanga — A spiritual teacher associated in the Theosophical sources with the Yogacharya tradition and teachings on meditative wisdom.

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

Atman — The universal spiritual Self; *Atma* is another form, and Atmic means pertaining to this principle.

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

Correspondence — A meaningful relation between different orders or levels; an instrument of analogy that requires attention to context.

Discernment — The capacity to distinguish what is true, fitting and spiritually significant; Buddhic discernment transcends personal preference.

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.

Evanescent — Passing or fading away; used here of periodic manifestations.

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.

Kama — Desire or appetite; its association with mind is called *Kama-Manas*.

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

Linga sharira — The astral or formative model of the physical body; *Linga sarira* is a spelling variant.

Lower quaternary — The four lower aspects of the human constitution: physical body, astral form, vitality and desire.

Mahayana — The Great Vehicle of Buddhism, associated with the bodhisattva ideal and the universal scope of wisdom and compassion.

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

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

Noetic — Pertaining to the higher mind and spiritual cognition, distinguished from merely personal or reactive mental activity.

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

Patanjali — The sage associated with the *Yoga Sutras* and the discipline of concentration, meditation and discernment.

Planes — Levels or orders of consciousness and substance within the Theosophical account of manifestation.

Prana — The life-principle or vitality active in embodied existence; pranic means pertaining to this current.

Pranamaya Kosha — The sheath or vehicle of vital energy in the Vedantic classification discussed in Theosophical sources.

Psychic — Pertaining to subtle or psychological modes of experience; its level and relation to spiritual intelligence depend upon context.

Raja Yoga — The discipline of spiritual self-mastery and concentration associated with Patanjali and the higher training of mind.

Samana — A current of *prana* associated in the cited traditional account with metabolic and systemic functions.

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

Septenary — Sevenfold; used of the human constitution and of cosmic principles or hierarchies.

Soul-force — Spiritual or moral power grounded in truth and inward discipline.

Sthula sharira — The gross physical body.

Synthesis — An integration that relates valid insights within a larger understanding while preserving necessary distinctions.

Taraka Raja Yoga — A system of spiritual training whose classification of the human principles is discussed by Blavatsky.

Triad — A group of three related principles or powers.

Udana — A current of *prana* associated with upward movement in the cited traditional account of yogic powers.

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

Upadhi — A basis, vehicle or limiting condition through which a principle acts; *upadhis* is the plural.

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

Vibhuti Pada — The section of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* dealing with powers and their significance.

Yogin — A practitioner of yoga; *yogi* is an alternative form, and *yogins* or *yogis* the plural.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — "The Gupta Vidya", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, 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: Place vitality among the instruments of incarnation. What difference does it make to regard those instruments as entrusted for use?

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 158.

“The student will now be better prepared to see that between the three *Upadhis* of the *Raja Yoga* and its *Atma*, and our three *Upadhis*, *Atma*, and the additional three divisions, there is in reality but very little difference. Moreover, as every adept in cis-Himalayan or trans-Himalayan India, of the Patanjali, the *Aryasanga* or the *Mahayana* schools, has to become a *Raja Yogi*, he must, therefore, accept the *Taraka Raja* classification in principle and theory whatever classification he resorts to for practical and occult purposes. Thus, it matters very little whether one speaks of the three *Upadhis* with their three aspects and *Atma*, the eternal and immortal synthesis, or calls them the ‘seven principles.’”

Meditation thought: Compare classifications by the relationships they explain. Which apparent disagreement may arise from grouping the same principles differently?

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 263, “Prâna”.

“*Prâna* (Sk.). Life-Principle; the breath of Life.”

Meditation thought: Hold the simple definition as a starting point. How does the breath-of-life image open a question that physical respiration alone cannot answer?

4. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 325.

“All life-energy works through all life-atoms; there is, therefore, a life-current existing in human nature which may be called *prana*. It is a sort of sum-total or quantum of life-energy within the metabolic system of the human body or, more correctly, within the astral body. It flows in that body like a fluidic current, and one might say that the elementals participate actively in it, as if swimming in an ocean of pranic life-energy.”

Meditation thought: Consider the current and the lives participating in it. What does this image suggest about responsibility for the use of one's capacities?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 325.

“Elementals reach out to the highest aspects of existence, which is why it is extremely misleading to link elementals merely to one principle, such as *prana*, in sevenfold man.”

Meditation thought: The passage prevents a narrow identification of elementals with one principle. What broader relationship does that correction make possible?

6. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 325.

“Whatever the linguistic problem, however, there should be no difficulty in seeing that one is really speaking of a vast, shoreless, boundless etheric field populated by billions of elementals. This is the true population of the cosmos, far more numerous than human beings or any other organic beings in any of the kingdoms of Nature. This being so, there is no way that one can even begin to understand human life apart from elementals.”

Meditation thought: Reflect on embodiment within a field of lives. How might this view change the care given to an ordinary daily activity?

7. R.N. Iyer — “Elementals”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, pp. 325–326.

“All daily activities of human life thus take on a fresh colouration and vitality, a magical potency involved with invisible, interior kingdoms. Every thought, every breath, every feeling and especially every word is filled with magic. Every instant, one either blesses or curses, elevates or degrades, hosts of elementals; every moment, one either sinks downward towards the demonic or soars upward towards the presence of the Blessed.”

Meditation thought: Choose one use of speech and examine the intention it carries. What effect upon others is already observable without speculative claims?

8. R.N. Iyer — “The Descent of Manas”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 168.

“We often notice that a mentally healthy individual is full of life and therefore very cheerful and generous, reaching out to others, due to this natural energy within the astral-physical body, the energy of *prana*. But there is also that aspect of the astral which is affected by lunar forces, by obsessional thoughts, and yet is constantly fluctuating like the visible moon.”

Meditation thought: Read the comparison as an invitation to examine direction of energy. Bodily strength or fatigue alone cannot measure a person's wisdom.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Aquarian Spirituality”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 67.

“Gandhi's soul-force is equivalent to the atomic noetic force of *Buddhi*, and his idea of moral power is equivalent to the psychic or molecular force of *prana*, moral perception and vital energy. Gandhi demonstrated and taught the possibility of noetic force using psychic force on behalf of human brotherhood and universal welfare.”

Meditation thought: Consider moral perception guiding available force. What would make energy more useful to a common purpose than enthusiasm alone?

10. R.N. Iyer — “Aquarian Spirituality”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 67.

“As more and more people come to see that selfishness, invariably rooted in the dissociation of human vital energy from its origins in the Great Breath, is inevitably suicidal, they also begin to recognize that it is only through noetic self-command that there can be genuine self-respect.”

Meditation thought: Where has personal energy been treated as an independent possession? What practical change would reconnect its use with a wider responsibility?

11. R.N. Iyer — “Vibhuti Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 291.

“By mastering *udana*, one of the five currents of *prana*, chiefly connected with vertical motion, the *yogin* makes his body essentially impervious to external influences, including the presence of gravity and the inevitability of death. By mastering *samana*, the current of *prana* which governs metabolic and systemic processes, he can render his body self-luminous and radiant, as Jesus did during his climactic transfiguration and as Moses is said to have done during his salvific descent from Mount Sinai.”

Meditation thought: Read this as a traditional account of yogic attainment. Let the emphasis fall on disciplined preparation, without treating extraordinary powers as a personal entitlement.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 49.

“Esoteric philosophy teaches that everything lives and is conscious, but not that all life and consciousness are similar to those of human or even animal beings. Life we look upon as ‘the one form of existence,’ manifesting in what is called matter; or, as in man, what, incorrectly separating them, we name Spirit, Soul and Matter. Matter is the vehicle for the manifestation of soul on this plane of existence, and soul is the vehicle on a higher plane for the manifestation of spirit, and these three are a trinity synthesized by Life, which pervades them all.”

Meditation thought: Universal life does not imply identical consciousness in every form. What distinctions must reverence preserve in order to become intelligent care?