

Purusha

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Purusha is the changeless Seer or pure consciousness distinguished from *Prakriti*, the field of Nature and its transformations, in *Sankhya* and *Patanjali's* Yoga. The defining question is how the knower differs from everything that can become an object of experience, including thought. In wider Theosophical usage, the term also signifies Spirit and the cosmic or heavenly Man. Keeping these contexts visible prevents a description of the witnessing principle from being mistaken for a complete account of every use of the word.

Professor Iyer explains that *Sankhya* is rooted in exact knowing and meticulous discernment. Its first task is to distinguish *Purusha*, Self or Spirit, from *Prakriti*, non-self or matter. *Prakriti* is Nature, the field of becoming and transformation. *Purusha* is pure consciousness. This distinction is not merely philosophical. It is meant to awaken discrimination. Until the Seer is distinguished from the seen, consciousness remains bound to the changing field.

In ordinary life, this confusion is constant. A mood arises and one says, "I am sad." A wound arises and one says, "I am injured." A memory arises and one says, "This is who I am." The mind moves, and the Self is falsely imagined to have moved. The personality changes, and consciousness identifies with the change. *Purusha* is the truth that none of these movements is the Seer itself.

Professor Iyer stresses that nothing positive can be predicated of *Purusha* except by corrective negation. It may be called the Perceiver or the Witness, but even these words can mislead if they imply ordinary intention or mental observation. *Purusha* is not an ego looking at experience. It is not a private spectator inside the head. It is pure consciousness beyond the field in which subject and object are arranged.

This is why *Purusha* cannot be a mental object. In "Kaivalya Pada," Professor Iyer says that *Purusha* is seen directly when the mind remains focused upon it and does not move. The mind cannot produce *Purusha* or capture it. The mind can only become still enough not to obscure it. When the lake is disturbed, the sun appears broken. When the lake is still, the sun is reflected without distortion.

The mind is not self-luminous in *Patanjali's* account. It changes and can itself be observed. Professor Iyer therefore distinguishes the true Knower from the changing instrument through which mental experience occurs. Calling *purusha* the Witness and the Knower does not attribute ordinary thinking or intention to it. These terms direct discrimination toward the condition of

awareness, beyond the changing act of knowing an object. Thought remains useful when its instrumental place is understood.

Sankhya speaks of a plurality of purushas. Professor Iyer explores the difficulty of applying numerical distinctions to what is beyond space and time. His wider Theosophical interpretation must be distinguished from simply declaring that classical *Sankhya* teaches one universal Self. The distinction matters: a comparison can reveal fruitful affinities without dissolving the particular claims of the systems being compared. Discernment begins with fidelity to the context in which each statement is made.

Theosophy preserves exact discrimination and deeper unity. H.P. Blavatsky presents *Purusha* and *Prakriti* as Spirit and Matter, two primeval aspects or poles of one root-principle in manifestation. In the conditioned universe, Spirit and Matter are inseparable, yet ever distinguished. Theosophy does not allow Spirit to become sterile abstraction or Matter to become dead substance. Their polarity belongs to a living cosmos.

To distinguish *Purusha* from *Prakriti* is not to despise Nature. *Prakriti* is the field through which experience, correction, and self-recognition become possible. In Yoga, the visible exists for the sake of the Seer. Nature becomes teacher when it is no longer mistaken for the Self. Body, sensation, thought, relation, beauty, suffering, and responsibility become aids when they reveal the difference between Self and non-self.

The false identification of *Purusha* with *Prakriti* is the root of bondage. Consciousness says, “I am the body,” “I am the mind,” “I am the role,” “I am the wound,” “I am the desire.” From this arise fear, attachment, aversion, pride, and sorrow. Liberation begins when the student sees that these belong to the changing field. They may be real as experiences, but they are not ultimate identity.

Purusha is also linked to *Ishvara*. Professor Iyer explains that *Ishvara* is *Purusha*, untouched by troubles, actions, and their results, immanent in all *Prakriti*. This special *Purusha* is not the personal ego magnified into deity. It is the Supreme Spirit, the luminous core of consciousness, the one principle upon which meditation may be fixed. *Purusha* is therefore not merely doctrine, but a meditative centre.

Consider a craftsperson receiving criticism of unfinished work. The first response may combine embarrassment, resentment, and an impulse to defend every choice. Observing that movement allows the person to ask which criticism is accurate and which is mistaken. This practical observation is not yet realization of *purusha*; it is a preparation in discrimination. The reaction can be acknowledged without allowing it to decide the whole response. Responsibility for improving the work remains, while identification with the defensive movement can lessen.

This exercise also protects the teaching from emotional withdrawal. An observer who feels detached may still be acting from pride or fear. The test is not a claim to occupy a superior inward position, but greater clarity and care in meeting the situation. *Prakriti* includes the instruments through which the response must be made: attention, thought, speech, and the body at work. Distinguishing the Seer from these instruments should improve their use.

This recognition also changes the way one meets beauty, suffering, and other beings. A flower, a face, a difficult neighbour, or a moment of silence is no longer merely material for reaction, possession, or judgment. Each becomes part of the field in which the hidden light of consciousness may be remembered. Pain remains pain, but it need not become the Self. The witness gives space, and in that space compassion can become steadier and wiser.

At the highest culmination, *Purusha* abides in its own essential nature. Professor Iyer describes *kaivalya* as the self-existence of *Purusha* in and as itself, free from ignorance, misconception, confusion, and sorrow. This is not annihilation. It is supreme freedom, the aloneness of the Self beyond dependence upon the modifications of *Prakriti*.

Yet Theosophy refuses to let this become spiritual self-enclosure. The liberated *yogin* beholds *Purusha*, which is himself, in the entire cosmos, and the entire cosmos, which is also himself, in *Purusha*. The real Self is not private possession. Its realization widens the circle of identity until self and cosmos are no longer opposed in the ordinary sense.

Human Solidarity acquires a deeper meaning within the Theosophical interpretation of this teaching. No person's dignity is exhausted by the shifting contents of a mind or the present condition of a body. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means looking beyond a single reaction while remaining attentive to its consequences. One need not know another's entire inward life to leave room for a capacity for understanding that the moment has not yet revealed.

Purusha thus invites exact inquiry into identification. A thought is known; a feeling is known; a claim to spiritual attainment is also something known. Each can be examined without being installed as the final knower. This repeated discrimination gives study its direction, while the culmination described as *kaivalya* remains more profound than an ordinary exercise of reflective attention.

Purusha is the changeless light by which all change is known. It is the motionless sun reflected in many moving waters. It is not the ripple, not the lake, not the image, not the wind that disturbs the surface. It is that by whose presence seeing is possible. When *Manas* grows still enough to reflect *Buddhi*, the human being begins to live less as a bundle of reactions and more as a conscious participant in the One Life.

Glossary

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

Abstraction — The inward or intellectual movement beyond particular objects and their limiting conditions.

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

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.

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.

Ego — A center of self-reference; personal appropriation is distinguished from the higher or spiritual Ego in the cited passages.

Ekatattva — One principle; the passage connects a single focus of contemplation with *purusha* or pure spirit.

Guna — A quality or mode of *Prakriti*; the three *gunas* are *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, associated with harmony, activity, and inertia.

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.

Immanence — Presence within; the immanent spiritual ground is understood as present within manifested life.

Intentionality — Directedness toward an object; the *Sankhya* passage warns against attributing ordinary intention to pure consciousness.

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*.

Kaivalya — Emancipation or spiritual freedom; in *Patanjali*, the Seer's release from mistaken identification.

Latency — A condition in which a possibility or power is present without differentiated expression; latent is the related adjective.

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.

Mukti — Liberation; in the *Sankhya* discussion, freedom attained through discrimination of Self and non-self.

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

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

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

One Life — The universal living ground expressed through diverse forms and beings in Theosophical teaching.

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

Patanjali — The sage associated with the *Yoga Sutras*; Professor Iyer refers to his account of contemplative realization.

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

Phenomenon — An appearance or event as experienced; phenomena is the plural, and phenomenal the adjective.

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

Polarity — A relation of contrasted aspects, such as subject and object or spirit and matter, within a common field.

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

Purusha — The Seer or pure consciousness in *Sankhya* and Yoga; in wider Theosophical usage, Spirit or the heavenly Man. The context determines the emphasis.

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

Sakshi — Witness; a designation used in the inquiry into pure awareness and discrimination.

Sankhya — An Indian philosophical system distinguishing *Purusha*, the Seer, from *Prakriti*, the field of Nature.

Seer — The witnessing principle in the inquiry into *purusha*; distinguished from the mental contents or changing acts observed.

Self-luminous — Known through its own light or awareness; the Yoga discussion denies that the changing mind has this status independently.

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

Tattva — A principle or elemental reality; *tattvas* is the plural.

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

Viveka — Discrimination between the enduring and the transitory, or the essential and the nonessential.

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

Yoga — A discipline of integration and spiritual realization; in the *Patanjali* discussion, the stilling of mental modifications and discrimination of the Seer.

Yogin — A practitioner of yoga; *yogins* and *yogi* are related forms.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer, "Sankhya Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 257.

"Simply stated, *Sankhya* holds that two radically distinct realities exist: *purusha*, which can be translated 'Spirit', 'Self' or 'pure consciousness', and *mulaprakriti*, or 'pre-cosmic matter', 'non-self' or 'materiality'."

Meditation thought: Distinguish awareness from the changing field presented to it. What familiar experience is ordinarily taken as the whole of the Self?

2. R.N. Iyer, "Sankhya Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 257.

"Nothing can be predicated of *purusha* except as a corrective negation; no positive attribute, process or intention can be affirmed of it, though it is behind all the activity of the world. It might be called the Perceiver or the Witness, but, strictly speaking, no intentionality can be implied by these words, and so *purusha* cannot be conceived primarily as a knower."

Meditation thought: The word Witness can suggest an observer with intentions. Examine where that picture helps and where it begins to obscure pure consciousness.

3. R.N. Iyer, "Sankhya Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 257.

"*Purusha* and *mulaprakriti* stand outside conceptual cognition, which arises within the flux of the other *tattvas*. They abide outside space and time, are simple, independent and inherently unchanging, and they have no relation to one another apart from their universal, simultaneous and mutual presence."

Meditation thought: Hold the statement within its *Sankhya* setting. What difficulty arises when ordinary spatial separation is used to picture these principles?

4. R.N. Iyer, "Sankhya Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 261.

"Liberation, *mukti*, is the result of *viveka*, discrimination, which is the highest knowledge. Even though *viveka* might be equated with pure perception as the *sakshi* or Witness, the process of attaining it suggests either an intention on the part of *purusha* or a response on the part of *prakriti*, if not both."

Meditation thought: Let discrimination begin with one identifiable confusion of Self and instrument. What becomes visible when the confusion is named precisely?

5. R.N. Iyer, "Sankhya Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 261.

"In *Sankhya* as in *Vedanta*, philosophy ends where realization begins. Philosophy does not resolve the ultimate questions, even though it brings great clarity to cognition."

Meditation thought: Conceptual clarity prepares an inquiry it cannot complete by itself. What would it mean to live a distinction rather than merely repeat it?

6. R.N. Iyer, "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 274.

"*Ishvara* is *saguna brahman*, the supreme repository of all resplendent qualities, in contrast to *nirguna brahman*, the attributeless Absolute. *Ishvara* is *purusha*, 'untouched by troubles, actions and their results' (I.24), immanent in all *prakriti*."

Meditation thought: Contemplate the difference between a passing state of mind and a principle untouched by affliction. Avoid using the idea to deny what needs care.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 275.

"Whilst any profound truth which deeply moves one can be chosen, to the degree that it is true – and so to the degree that it is efficacious over time – it is *ekatattva*, the one principle, which in *Sankhya* philosophy is *purusha* or pure spirit."

Meditation thought: Choose a true principle and attend to it steadily. Does the practice clarify the difference between concentration and compulsive mental repetition?

8. R.N. Iyer, "Kaivalya Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 297.

"*Purusha*, however, cannot be a mental object. Rather, it is seen directly when the mind remains focussed upon it and does not move. Significantly, direct awareness of *purusha* occurs when the mind ceases to act, which in *Sankhya* philosophy is equivalent to saying that the mind ceases to be what it is."

Meditation thought: Notice the attempt to make pure consciousness into an object. What is the status of the image that appears when you try?

9. R.N. Iyer, "Kaivalya Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 297.

"*Purusha* witnesses all mental modifications and is the true Knower precisely because it does not alter or waver. The mind is not self-luminous and cannot know itself by its own effort. Subject to change, it can be seen as an object by another, and ceaselessly changing, it cannot know itself."

Meditation thought: A thought can be observed and corrected. Reflect on how this differs from identifying the changing thought with the final Knower.

10. R.N. Iyer, “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 299.

“The *gunas*, no longer stirred to activity by the presence of *purusha*, are reabsorbed into absolute latency, and *purusha* abides in its own essential nature, without any trace of ignorance, misconception, confusion and sorrow. For the *yogin*, experience comes to an end, for he has become one with his true nature, which is *purusha*, the energy of pure consciousness – devoid of moments – which is cosmic ideation, upon which all noumena and phenomena depend.”

Meditation thought: Receive the account of *kaivalya* with humility. What small act of discrimination prepares the way without being mistaken for its culmination?

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 15.

“Spirit (or Consciousness) and Matter are, however, to be regarded, not as independent realities, but as the two facets or aspects of the Absolute (*Parabrahm*), which constitute the basis of conditioned Being whether subjective or objective.”

Meditation thought: Consider Spirit and Matter as distinct aspects within a shared ground. What error enters when either is treated as independently self-sufficient?

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 247.

“In the *Sankhya* philosophy, *Purusha* (spirit) is spoken of as something impotent unless he mounts on the shoulders of *Prakriti* (matter), which, left alone, is — senseless. But in the secret philosophy they are viewed as graduated. Though one and the same thing in their origin, Spirit and Matter, when once they are on the plane of differentiation, begin each of them their evolutionary progress in contrary directions — Spirit falling gradually into matter, and the latter ascending to its original condition, that of a pure spiritual substance. Both are inseparable, yet ever separated. In polarity, on the physical plane, two like poles will always repel each other, while the negative and the positive are mutually attracted, so do Spirit and Matter stand to each other — the two poles of the same homogeneous substance, the root-principle of the universe.”

Meditation thought: Keep the Theosophical comparison distinct from its account of *Sankhya*. How can understanding a difference make a spiritual analogy more fruitful?