

Sadhana

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Sadhana means sustained spiritual practice. It is the disciplined, repeated, inwardly ethical and contemplative effort by which a human being gradually reorients the whole of life toward truth, purification, meditation, and liberation. It is not merely a technique, a devotional mood, a set of exercises, or an occasional attempt to become calmer. *Sadhana* is the conversion of life into a field of practice. Thought, speech, motive, desire, relationship, work, suffering, beauty, duty, and silence all become material for transformation.

In Patanjali's Yoga, as Professor Iyer emphasizes, *sadhana* is classically threefold: *tapas*, *svadhyaya*, and *ishvarapranidhana*. *Tapas* is austerity, self-restraint, self-discipline, and eventually self-mastery. *Svadhyaya* is self-study, self-examination, and calm contemplation of *purusha*, the Supreme Self. *Ishvarapranidhana* is self-surrender to the Lord, the omnipresent divine spirit within the secret heart. Together these form a threefold alchemy: heat and steadiness, light and discrimination, humility and release from separative self-will.

The purpose of *sadhana* is the removal of the *kleshas*, the afflictions that imprison *purusha* and obstruct *samadhi*. These are ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to conditioned existence. They are not merely surface habits. They are deep colorings through which consciousness misreads reality. Ignorance mistakes *prakriti* for *purusha*, the false for the true, the impure for the pure, and the painful for the pleasurable. From that inverted perception arise self-importance, craving, rejection, and fear.

Sadhana is therefore not moralism in the shallow sense. It is not a list of behaviors pasted over an unchanged inner life. It is a radical correction of perception. The mind is diffuse, fragmented, agitated, and habit-driven because it has identified itself with what is not the Self. Practice begins by recognizing this condition without self-hatred and undertaking steady means of release.

Professor Iyer's reading of Patanjali shows that *sadhana* is whole-being practice. The eight limbs of *Taraka Raja Yoga* are logically successive but ethically and psychologically simultaneous. *Yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi* belong together because the human being is an integrated whole. Ethics affects breath. Breath affects mind. Mind affects perception. Perception affects conduct. Conduct affects the possibility of concentration.

The *yamas* form the foundation: *ahimsa*, truth, non-stealing, conservation of energy, and non-possession. These are not optional moral ornaments. They are the Great Vow, the first crucial step to spiritual freedom. *Ahimsa* is central because harm begins not only in outer action but in

speech, thought, impulse, and atmosphere. A mind that harms cannot become a clear vehicle of meditation.

The *niyamas* give the positive dimension: purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender to the Lord. These observances deepen as practice matures. Purity of conduct becomes purity of thought; purity of thought becomes purity of volition; purity of volition becomes transparent intention. A person may begin by cleaning up outer habits, but the real field is subtler: motive, fantasy, fear, resentment, self-assertion, and the wish to use spiritual practice for self-importance.

One practical teaching in the “Sadhana Pada” concerns the deliberate cultivation of thoughts opposed to destructive impulses. Hatred can be met with a considered effort toward goodwill, spite with a kinder interpretation, and self-indulgence with self-command. This does not require pretending that an injury never occurred. It changes what the mind does with the injury, so that recognition need not become a fresh intention to harm. Practice makes the higher response more available through repetition.

This has immediate ordinary-life use. When irritation rises, *sadhana* asks for a pause before speech hardens into harm. When comparison appears, practice invites rejoicing rather than contraction. When fear makes the body tight and the mind defensive, practice asks for breath, proportion, and remembrance. When self-pity becomes seductive, practice introduces gratitude, courage, or service. *Sadhana* is the art of using actual conditions as material for awakening.

The same principle governs meditation. *Sadhana* is not merely sitting and collecting pleasant states. Purification prepares the mind for *dharana*, complete concentration. *Pranayama*, if misused for selfish purposes under the *kleshas*, can become delusive and dangerous. Properly integrated, it subdues the restless mind and frees it to become the servant of the immortal soul. Technique without motive-purification can strengthen the very self it is meant to dissolve.

The Heart Doctrine gives *sadhana* its most beautiful measure. *The Voice of the Silence* says that before one can settle in *Dhyana Marga*, the soul must become like the ripe mango fruit: soft and sweet for others’ woes, hard as the stone for one’s own throes and sorrows. This is exact compassion. The practitioner is not asked to become soft toward self-pity or hard toward the suffering of others. The order is reversed: tenderness outward, diamond strength inward.

Here *sadhana* becomes inseparable from Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood. If practice merely makes the practitioner privately serene while others remain objects of indifference, it has failed its deeper purpose. True *sadhana* widens concern. It makes speech less violent, work more honest, relationships less possessive, and service less dramatic but more

steady. It helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi* so that thought becomes illumined by compassion rather than driven by separative cleverness.

The path also requires courage. Professor Iyer describes the strength needed to contemplate the vast human condition without condemnation. To see suffering across visible and invisible worlds and still believe in meaning, justice, and regeneration requires extraordinary courage. *Sadhana* is not merely personal calm. It is preparation for seeing more and serving better. Self-regenerative meditation may be undertaken not for private escape but on behalf of future humanity.

Sadhana is recursive. The student does not finish patience once and then proceed permanently to purity, meditation, and liberation. The same lessons return at deeper levels. Anger becomes subtler, pride becomes subtler, fear becomes subtler, devotion becomes subtler. The circle repeats, but sincere practice makes it a spiral. One returns to *ahimsa* in thought, *svadhyaya* in motive, and surrender in the hidden will.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception also changes the design of a practice. A person caring for a relative may have little uninterrupted time and may judge the day a failure because a planned period of study was shortened. A wider view includes the relative's needs, the student's available strength, and the purpose for which study was undertaken. Careful attention while helping, restraint when tired, and a modest return to study can belong to one discipline. The daily form remains flexible while the commitment to truth and usefulness remains firm.

Such flexibility is different from abandoning a promise whenever it becomes inconvenient. Self-study asks which change serves the underlying purpose and which merely protects a preference. A workable rhythm can be renewed after interruption. Its value appears in a growing willingness to learn from conditions and to meet obligations without resentment.

This is why continuity matters more than intensity. Sudden exaltation can fade quickly, but quiet continuity changes the texture of life. A daily act of restraint becomes a new freedom. A repeated return to silence weakens old speech habits. A small offering made without display trains the heart in non-possession. *Sadhana* works by cumulative fidelity.

Sadhana leaves the student with a simple and demanding truth: begin again, but begin consciously. Practice is the bridge between what one understands and what one becomes. It turns doctrine into character, aspiration into continuity, remorse into correction, and devotion into service. The small flame must be guarded until it becomes a lamp; the lamp must be tended until it can help illumine the path for others. In this way *sadhana* is not merely the means to liberation. It is the daily art of letting the higher become operative for the welfare of all.

Glossary

Abhinivesha — Clinging to conditioned existence; one of the five afflictions in Patanjali's yoga.

Ahimsa — Harmlessness or nonviolence in thought, speech, and action.

Asana — Posture; the steady bodily position within the discipline of yoga.

Ashtangayoga — The eight-limbed yoga set out by Patanjali.

Asmita — Egoism or identification of the power of seeing with its instrument.

Avidya — Fundamental ignorance or mistaken identification, from which the other afflictions arise.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

Dharana — Concentration; the gathering of attention upon a chosen point or object.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Dhyana Marga — The path of meditation or pure knowledge.

Dvesha — Aversion or repulsion; one of the five afflictions.

Ishvarapranidhana — Surrender or devotion to the divine Lord within; one of the yogic observances.

Klesha — An affliction that binds consciousness; *kleshas* is the plural.

Manas — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice.

Niyama — A positive yogic observance; *niyamas* is the plural.

Prakriti — Nature or the field of manifestation, distinguished from *Purusha* in Patanjali's yoga.

Pranayama — The regulation of breath and life-energy within the integrated discipline of yoga.

Pratyahara — Withdrawal or abstraction of the senses from their objects.

Purusha — The Seer or spiritual consciousness, distinguished from the changing field of *Prakriti*.

Raga — Attachment or attraction that binds consciousness to its objects.

Sadhana — Sustained spiritual practice integrating discipline, study, and devotion.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; a discipline with gradations culminating in spiritual cognition.

Svadyaya — Sacred study and self-examination, deepening toward contemplation of the Self.

Tapas — The concentrated effort of contemplation, self-discipline, and purification.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The integral yoga discussed in Professor Iyer's exposition of Patanjali.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Yama — Ethical restraint in yoga; also the divine figure associated with death and the teaching of immortality.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — "Sadhana Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 277.

"Patanjali initiated his teaching concerning praxis by calling attention to the three chief elements in the discipline of yoga: *tapas*, austerity, self-restraint and eventually self-mastery; *svadyaya*, self-study, self-examination, including calm contemplation of *purusha*, the Supreme Self; and *ishvarapranidhana*, self-surrender to the Lord, the omnipresent divine spirit within the secret heart. The threefold practice or *sadhana* can remove the *kleshas* or afflictions which imprison *purusha* and thus facilitate *samadhi* or meditative absorption."

Meditation thought: Let self-discipline, self-study, and surrender correct one another. Which member of the threefold practice needs more attention today?

2. R.N. Iyer — "Sadhana Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 277.

"The *kleshas*, though varied in their myriad manifestations, are essentially five: *avidya*, ignorance; *asmita*, egoism; *raga*, attachment; *dvesha*, aversion; and *abhinivesha*, tenacious clinging to mundane existence. Ignorance, however, is the broad field in which all the other *kleshas* arise, because they are no more than distinct specializations of ignorance."

Meditation thought: Name one affliction accurately without turning it into your whole identity. Ask what would weaken its influence on the next action.

3. R.N. Iyer — "Patanjali's Taraka Raja Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, pp. 266–267.

"Having set forth what must be done to attain and maintain meditative absorption, the second book, *Sadhana Pada*, provides the method or means required to establish full concentration. Any effort to subdue the tendency of the mind to become diffuse, fragmented or agitated demands a resolute, consistent and continuous practice of self-imposed, steadfast restraint, *tapas*, which cannot become stable without a commensurate disinterest in all phenomena."

Meditation thought: Choose a practicable rhythm of effort. Steadiness grows through returning after interruption.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Patanjali’s Taraka Raja Yoga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 267.

“*Vairagya* implies a conscious transcendence of the pleasure-pain principle through a radical reappraisal of expectations, memories and habits. The pleasure-pain principle, dependent upon passivity, ignorance and servility for its operation, is replaced by a reality principle rooted in an active, noetic apprehension of psychospiritual causation.”

Meditation thought: Examine an expectation that keeps pleasure and pain in command. What more enduring purpose could guide the same situation?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 280.

“Although the stages through which consciousness must ascend are sequential in one sense, the practice of *Taraka Raja Yoga* involves eight limbs or aspects which are logically successive but ethically and psychologically simultaneous. In fact, one can hardly pursue one part of Patanjali’s eight-limbed yoga (*ashtangayoga*) without also attending to its other divisions. Just as a human being, despite his ignorance, is an integrated whole, so too *ashtangayoga*, despite its logical sequence, is an integral unity.”

Meditation thought: Consider practice as an integral undertaking. A change in one part of life may require attention elsewhere.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 281.

“For Patanjali, however, *ahimsa* and the other *yamas* and *niyamas* constitute the daily moral discipline needed to pursue *Taraka Raja Yoga*. *Taraka Raja Yoga* is not a narrowly technical or specialized practice to be added to other instrumental activities in the world; it is rather the indispensable means for radically transforming one’s essential perception of, and therefore one’s entire relation to, the world. From the standpoint of Self-knowledge, which is ultimate gnosis, there are no greater disciplines.”

Meditation thought: Let conduct express the meaning of the teaching. What daily relation could be transformed by greater harmlessness?

7. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 281.

“The greatest obstacles to the restraints and binding observances are those thoughts which run in the opposite direction – thinking of impure things or acts, wishing to do harm for a perceived injustice, self-indulgence, self-deception and self-assertion. Such illicit and destructive thoughts are perverse precisely because they belie and defeat the initial commitment to the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Instead of suppressing such scattered thoughts or wallowing in hideous self-pity, one must firmly and deliberately insert into the mind their

potent opposites – love for hate, tenderness for temerity, sweetness for spite, virile confidence for the devilry of self-doubt, authentic self-conquest for compulsive self-indulgence.”

Meditation thought: Meet a destructive thought with a considered alternative. Acknowledge the facts while declining to renew an intention to harm.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 283.

“The process of purification is not an end in itself, but the necessary condition to prepare the mind for *dharana*, complete concentration. *Pranayama*, delusive and dangerous when misappropriated for selfish purposes pursued through subtle enslavement by the *kleshas*, is hereby integrated into Patanjali’s eightfold yoga as a preliminary step towards subduing the restless mind, freeing it to become the servant of the immortal soul, seeking greater wisdom, self-mastery and universal self-consciousness.”

Meditation thought: Keep purification directed toward clearer attention. Do not make a technique into an isolated pursuit of power or sensation.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Dhyana Marga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 380.

“Every authentic system of spiritual discipline indicates different stages upon the path of progressive mastery over the mind. The path of progressive awakening to supreme unconditional universal Truth is an arduous course of intensified practice leading to serene contemplation. *Dhyana Marga* — the Path of Meditation — is an inward fusion of mentality and morality that releases the mystical energies of enlightenment.”

Meditation thought: Bring clarity of mind and moral purpose into the same effort. Neither should remain an ornament beside the other.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Dhyana Marga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 380.

“Though skilful analysis can be helpful, it is no more efficacious than one wing of a bird in flight. The other wing is ethical practice, purification of motive and steadfastness in reference to one’s deepest integrity and fidelity of commitment. The balance between these two aspects of development has been stressed from the start.”

Meditation thought: Notice which wing is less developed in your present study. Give ethical practice and understanding room to grow together.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — “Practical Occultism”, *Studies in Occultism*, p. 2.

“It is easy to become a Theosophist. Any person of average intellectual capacities, and a leaning toward the metaphysical; of pure, unselfish life, who finds more joy in helping his neighbor than in receiving help himself; one who is ever ready to sacrifice his own pleasures for the sake of other people; and who loves Truth, Goodness and Wisdom for their own sake, not for the benefit they may confer — is a Theosophist. But it is quite another matter to put

oneself upon the path which leads to the knowledge of what is good to do, as to the right discrimination of good from evil.”

Meditation thought: Let service test the sincerity of aspiration. A useful act can be undertaken without waiting for unusual spiritual experience.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment III, p. 45.

“Ere thou canst settle in *Dhyana Marga* and call it thine, thy Soul has to become as the ripe mango fruit: as soft and sweet as its bright golden pulp for others’ woes, as hard as that fruit’s stone for thine own throes and sorrows, O Conqueror of Weal and Woe. Make hard thy Soul against the snares of Self; deserve for it the name of ‘Diamond-Soul.’”

Meditation thought: Cultivate tenderness toward another’s suffering and steadiness within your own difficulty. Let both qualities inform the next obligation.