

Saguna Brahman

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Saguna Brahman means *Brahman* approached with attributes, through divine qualities that give devotion and meditation an intelligible focus. Its concern is the relation of spiritual aspiration to *Ishvara*, wisdom, compassion, and sacred order within manifestation. *Nirguna Brahman* emphasizes the Absolute beyond all attributes. The distinction does not describe an imperfect and a perfected personal god; it distinguishes an approach through qualities from the unconditioned Reality that no quality can contain.

The distinction between *Nirguna* and *Saguna Brahman* is a distinction of standpoint. *Nirguna Brahman* is the attributeless Absolute, *Parabrahm*, beyond every predicate, relation, quality, name, form, and conception. Nothing can be truly said of It, because every statement introduces limitation. *Saguna Brahman* is the same Reality as approached within the field of worlds and beings, where consciousness requires symbol, relation, direction, and devotion. It is not a second principle beside the Absolute. It is the highest reflection of the Absolute available to the finite mind.

Professor Iyer develops this relation through a Theosophical interpretation of *Vedanta* and *Patanjali's* Yoga. In "The Seventh Principle" he distinguishes *Brahman* without attributes from *Brahman* appearing as with attributes. In "Samadhi Pada" he describes *Ishvara* as the repository of resplendent qualities and the *purusha* untouched by troubles, actions, and their results. These passages supply the particular interpretive setting. The terms should not be treated as though every Indian philosophical school used them in an identical way.

H.P. Blavatsky's doctrine of the Logos gives a Theosophical bridge into the same understanding. *Parabrahm* cannot will, create, or act as a finite person acts. The Infinite cannot become one being among others. Yet at the dawn of manifestation, *Parabrahm* manifests as *Mulaprakriti* and then as the Logos. The Logos is the basis of the subject-side of manifested Being and the source of individual consciousness. It is the mirror reflecting divine mind, the sacred Word through which concealed ideation becomes cosmically expressible.

Through this Logos-current, *Saguna Brahman* may be understood as the sacred intelligibility of manifestation. *Ishvara* is not merely a remote deity. *Ishvara* is the Supreme Spirit immanent in all souls, the primal sound *OM*, the keynote of being, the supreme repository of resplendent qualities. To meditate on *Ishvara* is to turn consciousness toward its highest possibility. To surrender to *Ishvara* is to allow personal will to become transparent to spiritual law.

This approach recognizes a need within embodied spiritual practice. The student may understand why the Absolute transcends definition and still require a definite ideal toward which to direct attention. A vow of truthfulness, reverence for wisdom, or devotion to a compassionate exemplar can provide such a focus. Its worth is tested by the change it encourages in motive and conduct. The ideal should educate aspiration while remaining transparent to a reality greater than the student's present conception.

Professor Iyer's image of the Diamond Soul offers a helpful governing symbol. The Absolute is the hidden source of light, but the Diamond Soul radiates that light through many facets so that beings of different temperaments and capacities may approach it. The jewel does not divide the light. It makes the light accessible. One person approaches through devotion, another through meditation, another through moral discipline, another through wisdom, another through service. The facets differ; the light is one.

This also explains why *Saguna Brahman* is not merely theological. It is ethical and transformative. If *Ishvara* is the supreme repository of resplendent qualities, then one cannot approach *Ishvara* while cherishing vanity, cruelty, possessiveness, or indifference. Devotion becomes a discipline of likeness. The student does not merely adore wisdom, but must become wiser. The student does not merely praise compassion, but must become more compassionate. The student does not merely invoke purity, but must purify motive.

A person who begins the morning by contemplating compassion may later meet someone whose needs disrupt a carefully arranged schedule. The ideal becomes practical at that point. Attention may reveal that a brief, unhurried explanation would help more than a generous promise that cannot be kept. Devotion has not disappeared into ordinary activity; it has acquired an exact task. To honor a divine quality is to let that quality correct one's conduct where self-interest would prefer an easier response.

Such a view naturally supports Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood. If *Ishvara* is immanent in all souls, no being is spiritually negligible. *Saguna Brahman* trains perception to see the sacred, not only in exalted forms, but in seed-form wherever life is struggling, obscured, wounded, or awakening. This does not remove discrimination. It makes discrimination more exact and compassionate.

Saguna Brahman also protects devotion from self-enclosure. If the divine is the inner source of all, devotion must return to the world as patience, truthful speech, custodial responsibility, and service. The world is not ultimate, but it is a field of responsibility. Nature is not mere matter, and other beings are not instruments of personal desire. The field of life becomes a trust.

There is one further safeguard. *Saguna Brahman* can be misunderstood when the lower self projects its preferences onto the divine. One may imagine a deity who sanctions fear, ambition, exclusion, or spiritual pride. Theosophical discipline reverses this. One does not use *Ishvara* to strengthen the personal self. One contemplates *Ishvara* to dissolve self-centeredness. This is why karma, *jnana*, and *bhakti* must work together. Action, knowledge, and devotion balance and purify one another.

At the summit, *Saguna Brahman* points beyond itself. Every name, form, quality, and perfection is a doorway, not the Real in its unconditioned nature. *Ishvara* points beyond itself to TAT, That. OM TAT SAT gathers consciousness and carries it toward the silence beyond predication. The jewel radiates, but the source remains inexhaustible. The Logos reflects, but the concealed Reality is never reduced to its reflection.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception prevents a cherished form of devotion from becoming a measure of everyone else's sincerity. Another student may approach through disciplined inquiry or quiet service, without sharing one's symbols or vocabulary. Professor Iyer's image of the many-faceted jewel helps here: different avenues of approach need not imply rival sources of light. One can examine a teaching carefully while honoring the possibility of sincere aspiration expressed in another form. Such respect gives universality a practical expression.

There is also a distinction between reverence and projection. If an imagined divine approval always endorses one's preferences, little transformation has occurred. A useful self-examination asks what the chosen ideal actually requires one to surrender: resentment, vanity, impatience, or the desire to control another's path. The offering becomes credible through that surrender. Spiritual qualities then function as disciplines of character, and the symbol becomes increasingly clear because less personal demand is imposed upon it.

Patanjali's special *purusha* is described through freedom from affliction and the binding results of action. In Professor Iyer's exposition, meditation on *Ishvara* therefore directs attention toward a principle whose purity exceeds the fluctuations of ordinary personality. It is not an invitation to magnify a favored human temperament. The difference becomes practical whenever devotion encourages greater freedom from resentment, rather than merely greater attachment to the image of oneself as devoted.

To understand *Saguna Brahman* is to live with reverent balance. One does not flatten the divine into a finite person, and one does not freeze the Absolute into an abstraction too remote for love. One accepts the luminous bridge: *Brahman* as approachable through *Ishvara*, Logos, OM, wisdom, beauty, compassion, and law. Through that bridge, the student moves from worship of divine qualities toward participation in them, until every quality becomes transparent to the attributeless Light.

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.

Astral — Pertaining to the subtle form or field associated in Theosophy with embodied life and psychic impressions.

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

Bhagavad Gita — The Song of the Lord; the dialogue of *Krishna* and *Arjuna*, central to the teachings of action, knowledge, and devotion.

Bhakti — Devotion; a sustained orientation of mind and will toward the divine.

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.

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.

Diamond Soul — Professor Iyer's image of a spiritual jewel whose many facets radiate light for beings with different avenues of approach.

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.

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*.

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.

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*.

Jivatman — The living Self; in Professor Iyer's quoted exposition, the universal life-principle beyond differentiated consciousness. Usage varies across philosophical systems.

Jnana — Spiritual knowledge or understanding; joined in the cited passage to devotion and contemplation.

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

Karma — Action and the law of causation through which intentions and deeds have consequences.

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

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.

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.

Moksha — Liberation from bondage or ignorance.

Motive — The inward purpose of an act, distinct from its outward appearance or the praise it receives.

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

Music of the spheres — The ancient image of a harmonious cosmic order, used in the quotation for inward awareness of universal harmony.

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.

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

Om Tat Sat — The threefold designation of *Brahman*; in Professor Iyer's exposition, invocation, relinquishment of personal claim, and affirmation of truth in service.

Pantheist — A person who relates deity to the universal whole; the quotation uses the term for certain Western interpretations of Universal Mind.

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.

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

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

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.

Psychic — Pertaining to personal and subtle awareness shaped by impressions and desire; not by itself equivalent to spiritual wisdom.

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

Relational — Defined through a relation to something else; contrasted with the unconditioned in these essays.

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

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

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

Sentient — Capable of sensation or feeling; in these passages, used for awareness associated with the embodied instruments.

Tat — That; a pointer to the unconditioned Real, also used in the *Gita's* discipline of offering without desire for personal reward.

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

Triakaya — 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.

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

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.

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

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

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

"In *Vedanta* the seventh principle is the *Jivatman*. On its own highest plane, it is a pure, unconscious and universal spirit. *Jivatman* must be seen as a pure subject independent of all possible experiences that may come to it when embodied in a world of subjects and objects. This is important in *Vedanta* because it provides for the possibility of a self or knower capable of apprehending, uniting with and becoming one with the Absolute. 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: Consider why spiritual practice may require a definite focus. How can that focus educate attention while remaining transparent to what exceeds it?

2. 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: Read the names slowly enough to preserve their distinctions. Devotion and study both become clearer when an important difference is not passed over.

3. 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: An approach through qualities belongs within relation. Can reverence deepen while acknowledging that no relational conception contains the Absolute?

4. R.N. Iyer, "Theory, Practice and Darshanas", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 254.

"Although *Brahman* is ultimately *nirguna*, without qualities, the aspirant to supreme knowledge begins by recognizing that the highest expression of *Brahman* to the finite mind is *Ishvara*, which is *Saguna Brahman*, Supreme Reality conceived through the modes of pure logic. Taking *Ishvara*, which points beyond itself to That (*TAT*), as his goal and paradigm, the individual assimilates himself to *Ishvara* through the triple path of ethics, knowledge and devotion – the karma, *jnana* and *bhakti* yogas of the *Bhagavad Gita* – until *moksha*, emancipation and self-realization, is attained."

Meditation thought: Let ethics, knowledge, and devotion examine one another. Which neglected part of this threefold discipline would make your present practice more balanced?

5. 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*. Cherishing the one source of all is the means by which one moves through degrees of *samadhi*, culminating in the complete union of the individual and the cosmic, the state of *kaivalya* or isolation."

Meditation thought: Contemplate freedom from affliction as a standard beyond personal preference. What response today would express a small movement away from resentment?

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

"*Ishvara* is OM, the primal sound, the basic keynote of all being, the source of the music of the spheres, mirrored in the myriad manifestations of *prakriti*. Surrender to *Ishvara* is aided by the silent repetition of the sacred OM and by deep meditation upon its mystery and meaning. When *bhakti* flows freely in this rapturous rhythm, consciousness readily turns inward and removes all hindrances to progress in *samadhi*."

Meditation thought: Let repetition be joined to attention to meaning. Does recollection of the sacred make the next ordinary encounter more patient and truthful?

7. 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: Remember the attributeless while honoring a chosen symbol. Can the symbol remain a doorway without becoming a boundary around truth?

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

"This sense of limitless sanctity throughout all manifestation brings the true seeker to the mystical and powerful idea of the Diamond Soul. One could think of and see the Diamond Soul as a shining jewel, precipitated from the Absolute into the realm of the relative, a jewel so multifaceted that all sentient beings may find means of approach by some aspect of the Light that it compassionately radiates in every direction."

Meditation thought: Picture the many facets without dividing the light into rival possessions. What different avenue of sincere approach could you learn to recognize?

9. 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."

Meditation thought: Contemplate the relation of inward realization to helpful presence in the world. How might devotion become more available to an actual human need?

10. 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: The passage distinguishes cosmic mind from its unconditioned ground. Let this prevent the most luminous attribute from being mistaken for the whole of Reality.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume II, p. 24.

“At the commencement of a great *Manvantara*, *Parabrahm* manifests as *Mulaprakriti* and then as the Logos. This Logos is equivalent to the ‘Unconscious Universal Mind,’ etc., of Western Pantheists. It constitutes the Basis of the subject-side of manifested Being, and is the source of all manifestations of individual consciousness.”

Meditation thought: Attend to the emergence of a subjective standpoint within manifestation. What does this suggest about the difference between the ground and a conscious expression?

12. H.P. Blavatsky, “Practical Occultism”, *Studies in Occultism*, PDF p. 3.

“For it is the motive, and the motive alone, which makes any exercise of power become black, malignant, or white, beneficent Magic. It is impossible to employ spiritual forces if there is the slightest tinge of selfishness remaining in the operator. For, unless the intention is entirely unalloyed, the spiritual will transform itself into the psychic, act on the astral plane, and dire results may be produced by it.”

Meditation thought: Examine a helpful intention for its concealed demand. What changes if the need for recognition is released while the care of the task remains?