

Samadhi

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Samadhi means meditative absorption, concentration, contemplation, and spiritual self-possession. It is one of the highest terms in yoga and one of the most easily misunderstood. It is not ordinary sleep, passive trance, emotional ecstasy, psychic vision, or pleasant relaxation. In Patanjali's Yoga, *samadhi* is the crown of the path and the central subject of "Samadhi Pada". It belongs to the precise discipline by which the modifications of the mind are restrained and consciousness becomes capable of direct spiritual cognition.

Professor Iyer anchors the teaching in Patanjali's opening aphorism: yoga is the restraint of the modifications of the mind. "Samadhi Pada" deals with concentration of mind because no serious practice of yoga is possible without it. The student is not invited merely to speculate about consciousness, but to undertake a demanding daily discipline by which awareness may become steady, awake, and truthful.

This distinguishes *samadhi* from the involuntary suspension of ordinary mental activity in sleep. Theosophical teaching does not regard dreamless sleep as an absolute absence of consciousness. Its point here is that a lapse in waking awareness does not of itself liberate the spiritual Self. *Samadhi* involves disciplined, lucid absorption; the absence of remembered thoughts is not a sufficient test of it.

Samadhi is approached through *abhyasa* and *vairagya*, assiduous practice and dispassionate detachment. These two are fused, Professor Iyer says, in the intense yet serene mental absorption known as *samadhi*. *Abhyasa* is the continuous effort to abide in a steady state. *Vairagya* is true detachment, the clarity that sees objects of sense as passing qualities of *Prakriti* while recognizing *Purusha* as the enduring reality.

Fragmented consciousness cannot leap suddenly into perfect absorption. Patanjali knew that no one bridges at once the gap between distracted consciousness and wholly unified meditation. *Samadhi* proceeds by degrees. This protects the student from fantasy and discouragement. Each genuine effort to overcome distraction, attachment, dullness, and self-identification prepares the next degree of inner unity.

The first broad level is *samprajnata samadhi*, cognitive contemplation, also called *sabija samadhi*, meditation with a seed. Here consciousness rests upon an object, theme, or focal point. A distinction remains between meditator and object. In its lower forms, it includes reasoning,

deliberation, bliss, and the refined sense of “I.” These states are exalted, but not final. Even bliss can become a subtle limitation if consciousness identifies with it.

Asamprajnata samadhi arises out of meditation on a seed, yet is itself seedless. Supreme detachment frees consciousness from even the subtlest cognition. *Nirbija samadhi* is no longer supported by a focal object. It intimates a state in which consciousness is self-sustaining, no longer leaning upon any mental support.

The Theosophical Glossary calls *samadhi* a state of ecstatic and complete trance and connects it with self-possession, control over the faculties, and the highest state of Yoga. This language must be heard carefully. Trance here does not mean unconscious passivity, and ecstasy does not mean emotional intoxication. Self-possession is the key: the human instrument is restored to its rightful centre.

The eight-limbed path shows why *samadhi* cannot be forced. *Yama* and *niyama* prepare the ethical field. *Asana* steadies the body. *Pranayama* refines breath and life-current. *Pratyahara* gathers the senses. *Dharana* holds attention to one point. *Dhyana* sustains contemplation. *Samadhi* completes absorption. A person cannot pursue *samadhi* honestly while neglecting harmlessness, truthfulness, restraint, purity, self-study, and surrender.

Samadhi may seem remote, but its preparation begins in small acts of attention. When anger arises and one does not instantly become anger, a little space appears. When anxiety spins and one remembers the witness, the mind is less enslaved. When speech is restrained before it harms, or desire is observed before it commands, the field of consciousness becomes less turbulent.

In “Vibhuti Pada”, Patanjali turns to *sanyama*, the synthesis of *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*. Through mastery of *sanyama*, *prajna* arises — cognitive insight, the resplendent light of wisdom. But even *prajna* is not the final state. It stands at the threshold of *vivekakhya*, pristine awareness of Reality, which cannot be fully articulated.

The danger in higher practice is fascination with *siddhis*, powers. Professor Iyer insists that true *samadhi* alone provides the rigorous and reliable pathway to self-mastery and sovereignty over the subtle forces of Nature. Without motive-purity, powers entangle the *yogin* in the world from which he sought freedom. H.P. Blavatsky gives the test: motive determines whether power becomes beneficent or malignant.

The Secret Doctrine gives the highest Theosophical horizon: high *samadhi*, the *turiya* state, in which the real One Self of man merges into *Brahm*. This does not mean destruction of the true Self. It means relinquishment of false identification. *Atma* is the One Witness. *Samadhi*, at its highest, opens toward this witness-consciousness beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.

The Voice of the Silence gives the heart of the same truth: do not separate being from Being; merge the Ocean in the drop and the drop within the Ocean; live in accord with all that lives. *Samadhi* must not become escape from humanity. If consciousness touches the One, it should return more capable of recognizing the One in all. The proof of higher absorption is deeper participation in Universal Brotherhood.

Samadhi has an ethical meaning because human beings suffer through identification with every ripple of the mind. A person who learns not to identify with mental modifications becomes less reactive and less violent. Such a person can listen more deeply, speak more carefully, and bear difficulty without projecting confusion onto others. *Samadhi* begins in meditation but radiates into relationship.

Human Solidarity gives the preparation for *samadhi* a direction beyond private experience. Concentration can be strong while motive remains narrow. The student must therefore ask what the trained attention is becoming available to serve. An absorbing inward state cannot substitute for truthfulness about an unmet obligation or tenderness toward a person in distress.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception includes the effect of our practice on those around us. If a carefully planned period of quiet is interrupted by a genuine need, can we respond without treating the other person as an enemy of spiritual growth? There may be times to protect solitude and times to offer assistance. Discrimination considers the circumstances. What matters is whether attention serves a freer and more inclusive purpose, instead of strengthening possessiveness toward a preferred state of mind.

There is also a quiet beauty in this discipline. *Samadhi* does not make life less vivid; it makes perception less possessive. A flower, a friend, a sorrow, or a duty can be met without the immediate contraction of “mine” and “me.” The world becomes a field in which consciousness may learn steadiness, reverence, and proportion. Beauty invites stillness. Suffering invites depth. Service invites self-forgetfulness. The path to absorption is not outside life, but hidden within the right use of attention in life.

At the deepest level, *samadhi* helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. *Manas*, when turned downward, names, compares, defends, desires, and divides. When turned upward, it becomes capable of luminous discrimination, reverence, and intuitive participation in a larger order. *Samadhi* is one of the supreme disciplines by which mind ceases to circle itself and becomes transparent to the light above it.

Samadhi names the deepening of disciplined attention into direct spiritual cognition. Its gradations deserve careful study, and its highest meaning should remain distinct from the first successes in concentration. Ethics, self-study, and devotion give the effort a trustworthy

direction. The student can begin where attention is now, returning patiently to the work and offering its fruits through a life of greater steadiness, truthfulness, and care.

Glossary

Abhyasa — Steady, repeated practice; the effort to maintain a chosen state of attention.

Anga — A limb or component; in the quoted discussion, one of the eight limbs of yoga.

Asamprajnata Samadhi — Absorption beyond cognition of a supporting object; also spelled *asanprajnata samadhi* in the source.

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

Ashta — Eight; used in explaining the eight limbs of yoga.

Atma — The universal spiritual Self; a form of the term *Atman*.

Bija — A seed; in the discussion of meditation, a supporting object or germ of contemplation.

Brahm — The Absolute or supreme Reality in the cited Theosophical usage.

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

Deva — A divine or celestial being; the term has different levels of meaning in the sources.

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

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Guna — A quality or constituent of *Prakriti*; the three are *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

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

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

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

Nirbija Samadhi — Meditation without a seed or supporting object.

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

Prajna — Spiritual or intuitive insight; its precise level depends on the passage.

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

Pralaya — Dissolution or a period of non-manifestation.

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*.

Sabija Samadhi — Meditation with a seed, object, or focal support.

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

Samprajnata Samadhi — Cognitive or seeded contemplation; the source also uses the spelling *sanprajnata samadhi*.

Sanyama — The integrated discipline of concentration, contemplation, and meditative absorption.

Siddhi — A developed power or capacity; *siddhis* is the plural.

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

Turiya — The fourth state of spiritual wakefulness, beyond waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Vivekakhyaati — Unbroken discriminative cognition; the continuous discernment of the Seer from the seen.

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

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

Yuj — The Sanskrit verbal root associated with yoking, joining, or concentration.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 269.

"Patanjali set down his most famous words: '*yogash chitta-vritti-nirodhah*', 'Yoga is the restraint of the modifications of the mind.' He stated the essential meaning of yoga without any argument or illustration, as if he were providing a basic axiom. He thus showed at the very start that he was concerned with practical instruction rather than theoretical exposition."

Meditation thought: Attend to the mind's movements without making each one authoritative. Choose one brief period in which to practice a steady focus.

2. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 271.

“Patanjali taught that deliverance can only come through *abhyasa*, assiduous practice, and *vairagya*, dispassionate detachment. *Abhyasa* is the active opposite of passive sleep, and *vairagya* frees one from all attachments, including the *kleshas*, which induce misconceptions. Together, these two mirror in the world of change that which is changeless beyond it.”

Meditation thought: Let practice and detachment support each other. Effort becomes more stable when it is less driven by the demand for immediate success.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 272.

“*Abhyasa* and *vairagya* are fused in the intense yet serene mental absorption known as *samadhi*. Patanjali characterized *samadhi* (which means ‘concentration’, ‘contemplation’ and ‘meditation’, depending on the context) in relation to a succession of stages, for if *samadhi* signifies a specific state, the contemplative seeker would either abide in it or fail to do so.”

Meditation thought: Consider absorption as a discipline with gradations. Patience belongs to the accuracy of the teaching.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 272.

“But Patanjali knew that no one can suddenly bridge the gap between fragmented, distracted consciousness and wholly unified meditation. Rather, concentration (*samadhi*) proceeds by degrees for one who persists in the effort, because one progressively overcomes everything that hinders it.”

Meditation thought: Value a genuine reduction of distraction without exaggerating its significance. The next faithful effort grows from the present one.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 272.

“The first is *sanprajnata samadhi*, cognitive contemplation, in which the meditator is aware of a distinction between himself and the thought he entertains. This form of meditation is also called *sabija samadhi*, or meditation with a seed (*bija*) wherein some object or specific theme serves as a focal point on which to settle the mind in a steady state.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish the meditator, the object, and the sustained attention. This gives the language of seeded meditation a clear point of study.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 273.

“*Asanprajnata samadhi* arises out of meditation on a seed though it is itself seedless. Here supreme detachment frees one from even the subtlest cognition and one enters *nirbija samadhi*, meditation without a seed, which is self-sustaining because free of any supporting focalization on an object.”

Meditation thought: The passage describes a state beyond an object of cognition. Preserve its depth without treating mental blankness as its equivalent.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Patanjali’s Taraka Raja Yoga”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 266.

“*Samadhi* Pada, the first book, deals with concentration of mind (*samadhi*), without which no serious practice of Yoga is possible. Since *samadhi* is necessarily experiential, this pada explores the hindrances to and the practical steps needed to achieve alert quietude. Both restraint of the senses and of the discursive intellect are essential for *samadhi*.”

Meditation thought: Notice that alert quietude requires preparation. Which recurring disturbance is asking for an ethical or practical correction?

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

“Patanjali enumerated the eight (*ashta*) limbs (*anga*) of this *Taraka Raja Yoga* as five which concern karma and lay the foundation for meditation, and three which constitute meditation itself: restraint (*yama*), binding observance (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), regulation of breath (*pranayama*), abstraction and withdrawal from the senses (*pratyahara*); concentration (*dharana*), contemplation (*dhyana*) and complete meditative absorption (*samadhi*).”

Meditation thought: Review the relation of conduct and contemplation. A neglected obligation can matter as much as a neglected period of concentration.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Vibhuti Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 285.

“The novice who nonetheless is capable of entering *samadhi* may take a long time to move from *dharana* to deep *samadhi*, because he experiences the entire movement as a radical change in consciousness. But the adept in *sanyama* can include all three in a virtually instantaneous act, thus arousing the ability to move from one object of contemplation to another almost effortlessly.”

Meditation thought: Keep the novice’s sequence distinct from the adept’s mastery. Let the comparison encourage methodical practice without haste.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Vibhuti Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 285.

“*Prajna*, cognitive insight, the resplendent light of wisdom, or intuitive apprehension, comes as a result of mastering *sanyama*. Although *prajna* is the highest level of knowledge to which philosophy can aspire, it is not the supreme state, for it halts at the threshold of *vivekakhyati*, pristine awareness of Reality, which can be neither articulated nor elucidated.”

Meditation thought: Study the difference between insight and its culmination. A clear thought can serve the inquiry without being its final measure.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 294.

“True *samadhi* alone provides the rigorous, progressive and reliable pathway to self-mastery and sovereignty over the subtle forces of Nature. With such complete command of the *gunas* or modes of *prakriti* as it manifests in the mind and in the external world, the adept *yogin* can alter his nature from one class of being (the human) to another (a *deva* or god, in a broad sense of the term), if the karmic conditions in life are congenial and conducive to rapid development.”

Meditation thought: Let the account of advanced powers reinforce care for motive. The purpose of discipline should remain wider than fascination with capacity.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 570.

“In *Pralaya*, or the intermediate period between two *manvantaras*, it loses its name, as it loses it when the real ONE self of man merges into *Brahm* in cases of high *Samadhi* (the *Turiya* state) or final Nirvana; ‘when the disciple’ in the words of Sankara, ‘having attained that primeval consciousness, absolute bliss, of which the nature is truth, which is without form and action, abandons this illusive body that has been assumed by the *atma* just as an actor (abandons) the dress (put on).’”

Meditation thought: Remember the passage’s reference to high *samadhi*. Its metaphysical scope calls for precise distinctions and humility in application.