

Self-study

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Self-study is the disciplined and compassionate examination of consciousness in the light of the higher Self. It is not self-obsession, psychological self-display, or mere analysis of personality. In the Theosophical sense, it is the deliberate effort to see motive, thought, speech, desire, fear, memory, and action as parts of a karmic field that can be purified and transformed. It asks not only what one feels or thinks, but why one seeks, speaks, reacts, resists, serves, or loves.

Professor Iyer places self-study beside meditation as one of the central needs of human life. In “Meditation and Self-Study”, he says that both concern “the longest journey of the soul.” This shows that self-study is not a small psychological exercise. It belongs to the whole pilgrimage of the human being. The student does not merely gather doctrines or admire sages; the student learns to examine the instrument through which every doctrine is received, distorted, remembered, or made living.

Self-study and meditation must be kept together. Without meditation, self-study can become anxious, circular, or morbid. The lower mind may analyze itself endlessly while remaining enclosed within its own reactions. Without self-study, meditation can become escape, private consolation, or a subtle claim to spiritual altitude. Meditation steadies and widens consciousness; self-study shows what still obstructs the light. Together they form a double discipline: one opens the inner sky, the other clears the clouds.

Professor Iyer offers the image of a golden chord. He speaks of a golden chord connecting the ideal man of meditation with the struggling human being who, through pain, awakening, and rescued moments of sincerity, must come to know himself. Self-study is the patient finding of that chord within daily life. It listens for the continuity between the Buddha-potential hidden in every human being and the confused personality that forgets, reacts, envies, fears, and defends.

The first practical object of self-study is motive. H.P. Blavatsky warns in *Studies in Occultism* that motive determines whether power becomes beneficent or harmful. Professor Iyer gives the same safeguard when he says that the aspirant must refine, study, and purify motive before rushing into meditation. Why does one seek? Is it for truth or consolation? Service or superiority? Freedom or escape? Wisdom or self-importance? Such questions cannot be answered once and dismissed. They must become part of daily honesty.

True self-study must also become compassionate. There is a false self-study that makes people harsh, critical, and clever about defects. It sees through everything and loves nothing. Real self-

study works differently. When one sees fear, craving, vanity, loneliness, and self-deception in oneself, one becomes more patient with the same forces in others. One does not excuse harm, but one ceases to treat weakness as alien. The study of one's own lower nature becomes an education in exact compassion.

This is why self-study belongs to Human Solidarity and Universal Brotherhood. When one sees a desire or fear in oneself, one begins to understand the immense field of desire and fear in humanity. One's private struggle is recognized as a small part of the common human predicament. Such recognition is not sentimental; it is morally clarifying. It allows the student to work inwardly without becoming self-enclosed.

Imagine leaving a discussion convinced that someone has slighted us. A useful review begins with what was actually said, then distinguishes that event from the interpretation added to it. Was the painful element a real discourtesy, the loss of an expected compliment, or an old fear revived by an ambiguous tone? Several possibilities may coexist. We need not force a verdict. We can acknowledge a hurt, investigate an assumption, and decide whether clarification is needed. This gives self-study a practical direction: the next conversation can be more truthful because we have examined what we would otherwise carry into it.

The review should also notice what went well. Perhaps we listened carefully for a moment, restrained an unjust reply, or admitted uncertainty. These are clues to capacities worth strengthening. A record containing only faults distorts the evidence as surely as self-congratulation does. The question is what conditions helped a better response become possible, and how those conditions might be renewed without demanding a perfect performance.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception places the incident within a shared situation. The other speaker may have concerns we have not seen; the group may be tired; our own reaction may reflect an expectation we never expressed. Wider inquiry makes responsibility more accurate. It also establishes a boundary to speculation: self-study gives us work to do with our own motives, while another person's inward life requires humility, listening, and respect.

Self-study must not become self-absorption. To study oneself rightly is to become more useful. Clearer motive should make speech less injurious. A quieter ego should make relationships less possessive. A more honest recognition of ignorance should make learning more humble. A less reactive mind should make work more reliable. The test is not whether one can describe oneself with subtlety, but whether one's presence becomes less burdensome and more beneficent in the shared field of life.

A brief evening recollection can make the work concrete. Choose one incident rather than attempting to judge an entire life. Recall the intention, the words or action, and the response that

followed. Ask what was known at the time and what has become clearer since. If repair is due, decide upon a practicable step. Then allow the review to end. Its purpose has been served when it prepares a more conscious response, not when every uncertainty has been forced into an explanation.

The higher Self gives this discipline its spiritual horizon. In Theosophical psychology, the changing personality is an instrument of a deeper individuality whose possibilities exceed its present habits. *Manas* can observe these habits and gradually become more responsive to *Buddhi*, spiritual discernment. The student therefore studies an instrument capable of improvement. There is room for seriousness and also for patience, because a mistaken reaction need not become a permanent definition of the person who made it.

Self-study is also a form of stewardship. Thought, speech, emotion, and habit are not wholly private. They leave impressions in the subtle field. Professor Iyer's teaching on elementals suggests that real welfare begins within, in mind and heart, and then moves outward through responsibility in thought, speech, and action. Within this Theosophical account, the unseen consequences of thought enlarge responsibility. In everyday experience, its visible expression can be tested through more trustworthy speech and more considerate action.

Self-study is preparation for death and for freedom. If personality is woven from illusions, anxieties, memories, and identifications, then honest self-study loosens the false claim of the lunar form. One learns to distinguish the essential from the incidental, the witness from the mask, the enduring from the fleeting. This does not make life cold; it makes life more tender, because one sees how much suffering comes from mistaking the passing for the permanent.

At its deepest, self-study is an act of love for truth. It says: let me not be deceived by myself where I can help it. Let me not misuse sacred ideas to protect vanity. Let me not become clever without becoming kind. Let me not seek peace while abandoning humanity. When joined to meditation, duty, and service, self-study helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. The golden chord is tuned more clearly, and knowledge begins to become character, character becomes service, and service becomes quiet participation in the welfare of all beings.

Glossary

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

Gelukpa — The Tibetan Buddhist tradition invoked in the quoted discussion for its emphasis on purifying motive before meditation.

Lanoo — A disciple or learner; the form of address used in *The Voice of the Silence*.

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

Maya — Illusion or conditioned appearance; the tendency to take the relative as final reality.

Rishi — A sage or seer of the sacred wisdom; *rishis* is the plural.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Meditation and Self-Study” — p. 302

“Meditation and self-study are of immeasurable importance to every single person. They concern the longest journey of the soul, the divine discontent in human life. The quest for true meditation and the yearning for real self-knowledge are as old as thinking man. Today, more than ever before in recorded history, there is a widespread hunger for teaching and instruction concerning meditation and concentration. Some seek even more, longing for a way of life irradiated by the inward peace and joyous strength of contemplation.”

Meditation thought: Place the desire for self-knowledge within the soul’s long journey. What kind of understanding would make your presence more helpful today?

2. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Meditation and Self-Study” — p. 302

“The hunger for authentic knowledge and reliable techniques of meditation, and the poignant concern for self-definition, are paramount needs of our time. They are more fundamental, more lasting and more bewildering than all other clamorous claims. But they appear to move in opposite directions. The impulse toward meditation seems to be towards opting out of the world — the world of illusion — or at least the decaying structure of any society. It suggests liberation, an escape from the great wheel of birth and death and the whole life-process. It involves the desire for an equivalent to the conventional concepts of heaven. Images of eternal, nirvanic and absolute self-transcendence are often analogous to the perpetual and perfect release which men desperately seek and fail to find on the physical plane of the lower eros. On the other hand, the entire concern for self-analysis and self-understanding is bound up with the need to improve our relation to our fellow men, our capacity for survival, the abject dependence on acceptance and love. It is so much directed to a re-entry into the world that self-study and meditation seem to represent poles that fly off in opposite directions.”

Meditation thought: Notice the wish for inward peace and the wish to live well with others. Let both belong within a single, honest inquiry.

3. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Meditation and Self-Study” — p. 306

“There is in every single human being the embryo of this ideal man of meditation, and we can at least imagine what it would be like for such a being to be present somewhere in our midst, if not in ourselves. We also can recognize that we have our own share in the desperate demand for psychological survival. In this way we restore an integrity to our own quest and are

somewhat deserving of that illumination which will take hold in our consciousness in relation to the great and priceless teaching. We might begin to wonder whether perhaps there is a golden chord that connects the golden sphere of a man of meditation and the complex intermediary realms in which he must, by pain and anguish and awakening, by knitting together minute golden moments rescued from a great deal of froth and self-deception, come to know himself. If there were not a fundamental connection between meditation and self-study, something of the uniquely precious wisdom in this great text would be lost to us."

Meditation thought: Recall a moment of sincere self-recognition. Contemplate it as one strand connecting your present effort with a higher possibility of being.

4. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — "Meditation and Self-Study" — p. 306

"When we begin to realize this in our lives, we come to appreciate that, while we may not be in a position to make judgments about teachers and schools in a vast and largely unrecorded history or in our own time, nonetheless we do know that there is something profoundly important in stressing both meditation and self-study, in bringing the two together. We must reconcile what looked like a pair of opposites and get beyond despair to something else which allows an existential and dynamic balance between meditation and self-study. This is the quality of compassion. It is in the heart of every human being in his response to human pain, and brings him truly into the fellowship of those Beings of Boundless Compassion."

Meditation thought: Let compassion connect contemplation with self-examination. What does another person's pain reveal about the purpose of knowing yourself?

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — "Meditation and Self-Study" — p. 306

"A man is a Buddha before he seeks to become a Buddha. He is a Buddha potentially. The Buddha at one time must have had a desire to become a Buddha, to understand human pain. The Buddha vow is holy because it is a vow taken on behalf of all. There is in everyone the capacity to want something for the sake of all, and also honestly to want it for oneself. In this there is an authentic mirroring, in every human heart, of the highest, the holiest and the most pregnant of beginnings of the quest. There are many beginnings, many failures, and many seeming endings. The quest itself, since it applies to all beings and not only to any one man, is beginningless and endless. It is universal, since any individual quest in this direction becomes at some point merged into the collective quest. Put in poetical form, or recognized in the simplest feelings, there is something metaphysically important and philosophically fundamental to the connection between meditation or self-transcendence, and the kind of self-study which makes true self-actualization possible."

Meditation thought: Hold potential and practice together. The capacity for a universal motive can be honoured through an imperfect but sincere beginning.

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Meditation and Self-Study” — p. 307

“Here we touch on a crucial emphasis, maintained sedulously by the *Gelukpa* tradition of Tibet, which affirms that unless you spend sufficient time in refining, studying and purifying your motive, in using compassion as fuel to generate the energy needed to take off and land, you should not begin to rush into meditation. It is a slow school, but it greets the aspirant in the name of all. It scorns powers and the notion of one man becoming a superman in isolation from the quest of other men. Making no promises or claims, it does not insult our intelligence by promising us something to be attained without effort.”

Meditation thought: Examine the motive beneath spiritual ambition. Which aspiration grows clearer when it is placed in the service of other beings?

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Meditation and Self-Study” — p. 307

“Are we not old enough in history to be somewhat apprehensive of schools that promise too much and too soon, when we know that this does not work in any sphere of life? Would we go to some local, loud-talking musician who tells us that he could make us as good as Casals in a week? Would we even take him seriously? We might go to him out of fun or sympathy or curiosity. Why in the most sacred of all realms should we be misled? Is it because of our impatience, our feeling of unworthiness, an advance fear of failure? These questions throw us back upon ourselves. In raising them, in probing our own standpoint at the original moment of the beginning of the quest, we make discoveries about ourselves.”

Meditation thought: Allow impatience to become an object of study. What promise attracts you because it seems to spare the patient work of learning?

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Mental Posture” — p. 315

“Mental posture is critical and crucial, and everyone can at any time alter his or her standpoint. One way to do it at all levels is to emulate the wise *Rishis* of the *Rig Veda*. Having given the great Hymn of Creation, raising questions about why, when, how it all began, they said, ‘Who knows?’ The gods, the sages? Perhaps not even they. When people gain the thrill of true agnosticism then they liberate themselves from the thralldom of strain and from self-concern in its negative, destructive, wasteful sense. They begin to release the living power of the continuity of the divine spirit within the temple and the tenement of the reflected ray, so that the solar light activates all latent centres and cells within the body.”

Meditation thought: Practise the freedom of an honest uncertainty. What becomes easier to investigate when you no longer need to appear certain?

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “The Mystery of the Ego” — p. 329

“As taught and exemplified by Socrates, philosophic self-study during life is an integral part of a continual preparation for the moment of death. A fruitful source for study and reflection is the *Bhagavad Gita*. Robert Crosbie suggests, in his remarks on the eighth chapter, that there is a

real danger that fruits of effort will not carry over to the next life. The measure of difficulty in truly availing oneself of the teaching is identical to that involved in becoming immortal. Those for whom the teaching becomes a reality are able to reverse the false image given by the *maya* of the life process and by the moulds of interaction of men in terms of the reality they assign to the finite, the ever-fleeting and the false.”

Meditation thought: Consider what is enduring in a day’s experience. Which learning would you wish to carry beyond the passing claims of personality?

10. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “Elementals” — p. 320

“Real human welfare and well-being proceed from within without, beginning in the mind and heart and enacted through responsibility in thought and speech before they are reflected in outward action. The collective regeneration of society, therefore, depends upon the efforts of individuals to regenerate themselves fundamentally – first at the level of their basic self-consciousness, and later in relation to their vestures. Working outward from what one thinks of oneself, this regeneration must involve existing elementals in one’s own being and will have definite effects upon everything with which one has contact and relationship. One must do this without falling into increasing self-obsession. One must sustain a universal motive.”

Meditation thought: The passage places inward change within collective welfare. Choose one habit of thought whose improvement would also benefit those around you.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *Studies in Occultism* — “Practical Occultism” — p. 3

“Occultism is not magic. It is comparatively easy to learn the trick of spells and the methods of using the subtler, but still material, forces of physical nature; the powers of the animal soul in man are soon awakened; the forces which his love, his hate, his passion, can call into operation, are readily developed. But this is Black Magic — Sorcery. 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: Reflect upon motive before seeking greater influence or capacity. What would help keep a useful power answerable to the welfare of others?

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence* — p. 10

“Before the ‘mystic Power’ can make of thee a god, *Lanoo*, thou must have gained the faculty to slay thy lunar form at will. The Self of Matter and the SELF of Spirit can never meet. One of the twain must disappear; there is no place for both. Ere thy Soul’s mind can understand, the bud of personality must be crushed out, the worm of sense destroyed past resurrection. Thou canst not travel on the Path before thou hast become that Path itself. Let thy Soul lend its ear to every cry of pain like as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun. Let not the fierce Sun dry one tear of pain before thyself hast wiped it from the sufferer’s eye.”

Meditation thought: Read the language of slaying as the overcoming of selfish identification. The passage directs that discipline toward hearing and relieving suffering.