

Smriti

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Smriti means memory, recollection, retentiveness, and what is remembered. In ordinary life, memory seems simple: one remembers events, people, pleasures, wounds, failures, and duties. Yet in Patanjali's Yoga and in Theosophical teaching, *smriti* is a profound key to continuity of consciousness. It can bind the mind to the past, or it can help the soul recover the golden thread of its higher purpose.

The word also names a class of inherited teaching. In *The Theosophical Glossary*, *Smriti* refers to traditional accounts and legal or ceremonial writings, distinguished from *Shruti*, what is heard or revealed. This literary use concerns the transmission of a tradition. The psychological use concerns remembering, while the contemplative use concerns purified recollection. They share a connection with what is retained, but a remembered text, a personal memory, and spiritual reminiscence are not interchangeable kinds of knowledge.

Professor Iyer explains that in Patanjali's Yoga, memory is one of the *chittavrittis*, one of the modifications of the mind-field. At this level, *smriti* is the result of clinging to objects and images of subjective experience. The mind stores impressions and repeats them. It remembers pleasure and seeks repetition; it remembers pain and builds defense; it remembers praise and constructs identity; it remembers injury and sustains grievance. In this lower sense, memory is not liberation. It is one of the ways the mind remains bound to *maya*.

Yet the same term becomes indispensable to *samadhi*. Patanjali taught that *samadhi* is attained through *shraddha*, *virya*, *smriti*, and *prajna*. Here *smriti* is not clinging, but retentiveness. It is the refinement of memory that extracts the essential lesson of each experience without needless elaboration. It remembers what matters, preserves the thread, summons full recollection, and awakens the deeper soul-memory stressed by Plato. Thus *smriti* must be transformed from binding memory into liberating remembrance.

The ordinary person lives much of life through unexamined memory. Reactions are often old impressions repeating themselves under new conditions. One is offended because an earlier wound is revived. One fears because memory projects past pain into the future. One desires because remembered pleasure has become an inward command. Memory becomes destiny when it is not brought into the light of self-study.

Spiritual *smriti* begins when memory is no longer allowed to rule unconsciously. It asks: What is the lesson here? What is merely personal elaboration? What must be remembered in order to

act more wisely? What must be released so the soul is not chained to shadow? Refined *smriti* turns experience into instruction without turning instruction into self-importance.

H.P. Blavatsky distinguishes memory, remembrance, recollection, and reminiscence in *The Key to Theosophy*. Memory, in the ordinary sense, is physical and evanescent, dependent upon the brain. Reminiscence, however, is soul-memory, an intuitional perception connected with the spiritual Ego and not limited to physical brain-memory. This explains why the absence of ordinary memory of past lives does not refute reincarnation. A new personality has a new brain and new memory, but the immortal individuality is not identical with that brain.

The Gupta Vidya expands this into a larger doctrine. Professor Iyer teaches that memory is integral to consciousness and that all beings possess memory of some type. In the human being, memory includes physical memory, remembrance, recollection, and reminiscence. Reminiscence links the human being to previous lives and to the *Sutratman*, the thread-soul. The soul is not a blank slate. It carries hidden continuity, even when waking personality cannot fully access it.

This continuity should not be romanticized. The point is not curiosity about past-life dramas. *Smriti* rightly understood asks: What has this life been arranged to teach? What tendencies have returned for correction? What gifts have been entrusted for service? What suffering can become insight? The past is not used to excuse the present; it is used to illumine it. One sees how tendencies recur and how the same lessons return until they are learned.

The distinction also requires intellectual honesty. A vivid image, a strong feeling of familiarity, or an attractive story about a former life is not thereby established as soul-memory. Ordinary imagination can be persuasive. The teaching directs attention toward the ethical lesson of continuity, not toward certifying private impressions. We can examine a recurring tendency and choose a wiser response without inventing a history to explain it. Where the evidence ends, restraint protects the inquiry.

There is also a daily form of *smriti*. In work, speech, fatigue, conflict, and obligation, one forgets the higher aim. Recollection is the repeated return to center. One may remember before speaking harshly, before acting from resentment, before reducing another person to a role in one's private drama, before allowing beauty to pass unnoticed, or before despair becomes a philosophy. Such moments preserve the golden thread.

Smriti has a compassionate dimension. When one remembers only personal injury, memory becomes a closed chamber. When one remembers the long pilgrimage of the soul, one sees others differently. Every being is carrying impressions, wounds, tendencies, and forgotten wisdom.

Refined *smriti* becomes a basis for Human Solidarity because one recognizes that the struggle to remember the Real is universal.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes what a community remembers. After a difficult undertaking, its most confident members may remember their own contributions while overlooking quieter work. Deliberate recollection can restore the colleague who prepared the materials, the person who noticed a risk, or the friend who stayed to finish. Such remembrance gives gratitude an accurate foundation. It also corrects a self-centred account before that account becomes the accepted story. The same faculty that rehearses resentment can be educated to preserve obligations and acknowledge help.

This is where *smriti* helps *Manas* turn toward *Buddhi*. *Manas* by itself can become a recorder of impressions and a defender of separateness. Turned toward *Buddhi*, it becomes a keeper of the essential. It remembers the moral law behind events, the dignity of beings, the possibility of service, and the higher meaning within ordinary life.

The Theosophical Glossary gives another key in *Chitta Riddhi Pada*, the “step of memory.” Physical memory must be sacrificed and recalled by will only when needed. This does not mean neglect of duty. It means mastery of memory. The student learns to remember deliberately, not compulsively; to use memory as an instrument, not live as its servant.

Chitta Smriti Upasthana adds the discipline of keeping ever in mind the transitory character of human life and the ceaseless revolution of the wheel of existence. This is not morbidity. It is liberating proportion. The remembrance of impermanence prevents the personality from making its moods and circumstances absolute. It can loosen attachment without freezing the heart.

Smriti is also stewardship of consciousness. What one remembers, rehearses, repeats, and nourishes becomes part of the atmosphere one carries. A mind that recollects grievance spreads grievance. A mind that remembers compassion, law, and the higher aim radiates another quality. To cultivate *smriti* is to become responsible for the memory-field one sustains.

Smriti, rightly understood, is not the burden of the past but the lighted thread through it. It teaches the student to release what binds, retain what instructs, remember what is sacred, and recover what the soul already knows. The lower mind remembers images; the higher mind remembers meaning. When *smriti* is purified by self-study, steadied by meditation, and warmed by compassion, it becomes a quiet power of liberation.

Glossary

Anamnesis — Recollection; in the Platonic and Theosophical context, the recovery of soul-knowledge.

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

Chitta — The mind-field, whose modifications are examined in Patanjali's yoga.

Chitta Riddhi Pada — The “step of memory”; a discipline of deliberate recollection described in *The Theosophical Glossary*.

Chitta Smriti Upasthana — The recollective discipline of remembering the transitory character of life and the cycle of existence.

Chittavritti — A modification or movement of the mind-field; *chittavrittis* is the plural.

Gupta Vidya — Sacred or esoteric wisdom; also the title of Professor Iyer's collected Theosophical writings.

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

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.

Moha — Delusion or bewilderment that binds consciousness to appearances.

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

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

Shraddha — Faith or steady confidence joined to a willingness to test the teaching through practice.

Shruti — What is heard or revealed; a category of sacred teaching distinguished from *Smriti*.

Smriti — Memory, retentiveness, or recollection; also remembered tradition and transmitted sacred literature.

Sutratman — The thread-soul; the principle of continuity through successive lives.

Veda — Sacred knowledge; the *Vedas* are the ancient body of revealed Indian scripture.

Virya — Energy, courage, and sustained spiritual effort.

Yogabhashya — The traditional commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras cited in Professor Iyer's exposition.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “*Smriti*”, pp. 304–305.

“*Smriti* (Sk.). Traditional accounts imparted orally, from the word *Smriti*, ‘Memory’ a daughter of Daksha. They are now the legal and ceremonial writings of the Hindus; the opposite of, and therefore less sacred, than the *Vedas*, which are *Sruti*, or ‘revelation’.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish inherited teaching from personal recollection. Ask what is being preserved, by whom, and for what purpose.

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “*Chitta Riddhi Pâda*”, p. 85.

“*Chitta Riddhi Pâda*, or *Tchitta Riddhi Pâda* (Sk.) ‘The step of memory.’ The third condition of the mystic series which leads to the acquirement of adept-ship; i.e., the renunciation of physical memory, and of all thoughts connected with worldly or personal events in one’s life—benefits, personal pleasures or associations. physical memory has to be sacrificed, and recalled by will power only when absolutely needed.”

Meditation thought: Notice a memory rehearsed without present usefulness. Can its lesson be retained while its compulsive repetition is allowed to quiet?

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “*Chitta Smriti Upasthâna*”, p. 86.

“*Chitta Smriti Upasthâna*, *Tchitta Smriti Upasthâna* (Sk.). One of the four aims of *Smriti Upasthâna*, i.e., the keeping ever in mind the transitory character of man’s life, and the incessant revolution of the wheel of existence.”

Meditation thought: Remember impermanence without withdrawing your care. What deserves attention precisely because the opportunity will pass?

4. R.N. Iyer — “*Samadhi Pada*”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, pp. 270–271.

“The five types of mental modifications are: correct cognition, based on direct perception, valid inference and verbal testimony; misconception, based upon something other than itself, namely the five *kleshas* or sources of sorrow – ignorance, egoism, attachment, hate and the fear of death, according to the *Yogabhashya*; fantasy, engendered by words and concepts, when and to the degree that they do not refer to reality; sleep, which occurs when other modifications cease and the mind is emptied of mental contents; and memory, which is the result of clinging to, or at least not letting go of, objects or images of subjective experiences.”

Meditation thought: Observe remembering as an activity of mind. Distinguish what happened from the elaboration that has gathered around it.

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

“For earnest practitioners, Patanjali taught, *samadhi* is attained in several distinct but interrelated ways – through *shraddha* (faith), *virya* (energy), *smriti* (retentiveness) and *prajna* (intellectual insight) – which are vital prerequisites for the meta-psychological yoga of *samadhi*. *Shraddha* is the calm and confident conviction that yoga is efficacious, coupled with the wholehearted orientation of one’s psychic, moral and mental nature towards experiential confirmation.”

Meditation thought: Place retentiveness beside confidence, energy, and insight. Which quality would help you remain faithful to the purpose of study?

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

“*Smriti* implies the refinement of memory which helps to extract the essential lesson of each experience without the needless elaboration of irrelevancies. It requires the perception of significant connections and the summoning of full recollection, the soul-memory stressed by Plato wherein one awakens powers and potentialities transcending the experiences of a lifetime. *Prajna*, released by such inner awakenings, enables consciousness to turn within and cognize the deeper layers of oneself.”

Meditation thought: Extract the essential lesson of an experience. Set aside details that merely renew self-importance or resentment.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Anamnesis”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 251.

“*Anamnesis* is true soul-memory, intermittent access to the divine wisdom within every human being as an immortal Triad. All self-conscious monads have known over countless lifetimes a vast host of subjects and objects, modes and forms, in an ever-changing universe. Assuming a complex series of roles as an essential part of the endless process of learning, the soul becomes captive recurrently to myriad forms of *maya* and *moha*, illusion and delusion.”

Meditation thought: Approach soul-memory as a doctrine to contemplate. Do not make a vivid private image into evidence of an established history.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Anamnesis”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 251.

“At the same time, the soul has the innate and inward capacity to cognize that it is more than any and all of these masks. As every incarnated being manifests a poor, pale caricature of himself — a small, self-limiting and inverted reflection of one’s inner and divine nature — the ancient doctrine of *anamnesis* is vital to comprehend human nature and its hidden possibilities.”

Meditation thought: Let the person exceed the role through which you know them. What capacity might your familiar picture leave unseen?

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

“Memory is integral to consciousness and since all matter is alive and conscious, all beings from cells to deities have memory of some type. In man, memory is generally divided into four categories: physical memory, remembrance, recollection and reminiscence. In remembrance, an idea impinges upon the mind from the past by free association; in recollection, the mind deliberately searches it out. Reminiscence, however, is of another order altogether. Called ‘soul-memory’, it links every human being to previous lives and assures each that he or she will live again.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish association, deliberate recollection, and the teaching of reminiscence. Clear distinctions protect a larger conception of continuity.

10. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 70.

“Memory is simply an innate power in thinking beings, and even in animals, of reproducing past impressions by an association of ideas principally suggested by objective things or by some action on our external sensory organs. Memory is a faculty depending entirely on the more or less healthy and normal functioning of our physical brain; and remembrance and recollection are the attributes and handmaidens of that memory. But reminiscence is an entirely different thing.”

Meditation thought: Respect the conditions and limits of ordinary memory. Its imperfection does not require filling a gap with certainty.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 71.

“For us, while memory is physical and evanescent and depends on the physiological conditions of the brain — a fundamental proposition with all teachers of mnemonics, who have the researches of modern scientific psychologists to back them — we call reminiscence the memory of the soul. And it is this memory which gives the assurance to almost every human being, whether he understands it or not, of his having lived before and having to live again.”

Meditation thought: Consider the spiritual meaning of continuity without inventing a former life. Bring the inquiry back to responsibilities that can be recognized now.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment III, p. 37.

“Thou shalt not let thy senses make a playground of thy mind. Thou shalt not separate thy being from BEING, and the rest, but merge the Ocean in the drop, the drop within the Ocean. So shalt thou be in full accord with all that lives; bear love to men as though they were thy brother-pupils, disciples of one Teacher, the sons of one sweet mother.”

Meditation thought: Remember a kindness received from someone easily overlooked. Let recollection become gratitude expressed through conduct.