

Svabhavat

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Svabhavat is a Theosophical term for the primordial spirit-substance from which manifestation unfolds. H.P. Blavatsky calls it the Plastic Essence and the root of all things; Professor Iyer develops its meaning through the Father-Mother symbolism of the *Stanzas of Dzyan*. It concerns a condition prior to the familiar division between spirit and matter, subject and object. The term asks the mind to begin with their underlying unity, and then to consider how a world of differentiated life can arise within that unity.

“Plastic” here means receptive to form and capable of formative expression. It does not designate a manufactured material. Nor is primordial substance an invisible version of an ordinary physical object. The doctrine concerns the basis of objectivity itself, before particular objects have emerged. Spirit-substance is a compound expression intended to keep life, intelligence and the possibility of form together. If we imagine matter already existing on one side and consciousness arriving later from another, we have begun after the distinction that *Svabhavat* asks us to contemplate.

In “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana,” Professor Iyer describes the primeval Father-Mother as pure potential in eternal duration and boundless space. He connects the Hindu image of *Lakshmi-Narayana* with the Theosophical use of *Svabhavat* as noumenal, homogeneous, radiant substance. Noumenal indicates the underlying reality rather than its sensory appearance; homogeneous indicates an undifferentiated condition. These descriptions belong to his comparative interpretation. Their function is to suggest inexhaustible self-generation without attributing the intentions and limitations of a human personality to the source of worlds.

His reading of the word emphasizes *sva*, intrinsic unity or selfhood, and *bhava*, being or becoming. The resulting thought is one of immeasurable potential for self-generation. This is not a claim that a separate thing has manufactured itself from nothing. The term directs attention toward an inward capacity for manifestation that precedes the separation of particular things. The language of generation is therefore metaphysical. It points toward the dependence of forms upon a common ground and toward the living character of that ground.

A further distinction is indispensable. Professor Iyer expressly describes *Svabhavat* as a veil upon Absoluteness, rather than the Absolute itself. The capacity to give rise to worlds already signifies a relation to manifestation. *Parabrahman*, the unconditioned Absolute, is beyond such relations. The student can therefore use *Svabhavat* to contemplate primordial potency while recognizing

that even this conception does not contain the ultimate mystery. Precision preserves reverence: the words become more useful when we understand both what they indicate and what they cannot encompass.

Blavatsky's comparison with *Mulaprakriti* develops the same inquiry from another direction. She calls *Svabhavat* the concrete aspect, in the terminology she is interpreting, of the Hindu abstraction of root-substance. "Concrete" in this comparison should not be read as physically solid. It marks a relative distinction within metaphysics. Her analogy between Ether and its informing principle, *Akasa*, similarly concerns related levels of substance and life. Such comparisons are aids to understanding a passage; they should not be hardened into a universal chart that overrides every other use of the terms.

The Stanzas provide a concentrated image: before the seven sons are born from the web of light, darkness alone is Father-Mother, *Svabhavat*, and *Svabhavat* is in darkness. Darkness here expresses latency before manifested light. The web's future differentiation is present as possibility, while its distinct threads have not yet appeared. The image allows the imagination to consider fullness without treating it as a collection of already existing objects. It is the hidden condition of manifestation, approached through a symbol that retains a silence beyond explanation.

Professor Iyer makes another careful distinction between self-generation and self-consciousness. Primordial spirit-substance does not imply the ordinary relation of a knower confronting something known. Such a relation presupposes differentiation. Universal self-consciousness may be considered as potential within the mystery, while other passages approach Father-Mother as Divine Thought. The shifting emphasis must be followed attentively. A term used to contemplate substance does not automatically carry every meaning it may have in a discussion of intelligence, deity or the perfected consciousness of spiritual beings.

This discipline of context is itself inwardly useful. The mind often settles a difficult question by choosing one familiar category and excluding the rest. We may treat an institution as nothing but its rules, a person as nothing but a recent action, or a disagreement as nothing but opposed preferences. *Svabhavat* encourages a deeper question about the relationships that precede those divisions. The philosophical exercise is to distinguish without forgetting the whole. Its practical application remains an analogy, while the cosmological doctrine retains its own scale and meaning.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception can begin when an apparent opposition has become rigid. Consider people responsible for a shared place who disagree about how it should be cared for. One emphasizes preservation, another accessibility, another the work required to maintain it. Before choosing sides, they can identify the common life each concern is trying to serve. The

differences remain real and require decisions. Yet recovering a shared purpose can reveal possibilities that were hidden when each position seemed complete in itself.

The relevance of the metaphysical idea lies in this refusal to make division final. Professor Iyer explicitly connects the dynamics of Father-Mother with finding relationships among apparently disparate aspects of life. Knowledge and virtue, insight and energy, thought and action can be examined together. The student asks how understanding may become effective and how action may remain answerable to understanding. A wider conception does not excuse vagueness. It gives analysis a larger field in which to discover a more faithful relation among the parts.

Human Solidarity follows from the teaching's affirmation of a common spiritual ground. Differences of circumstance, ability and outlook do not place any being outside the life from which manifestation proceeds. This recognition asks for patient attention to particular needs. To care for someone is not to dissolve that person's distinct experience into an abstract unity. It is to meet the experience with greater respect because the deeper kinship has been remembered. The whole becomes ethically meaningful through the quality of our response to its living particulars.

The same principle supports stewardship of the material world. If substance belongs to a living order, embodiment deserves care. Places, tools and resources enter relationships that sustain many lives. A contemplative sense of unity can encourage us to investigate the consequences of how we use them, to repair where possible and to avoid careless waste. These are practical implications of the philosophy, not substitutes for knowledge of the circumstances. Reverence becomes dependable when it is joined with observation, skill and the willingness to learn from results.

Contemplation of *Svabhavat* may also loosen the tendency to mistake a concept for the reality it indicates. We need words to think together, but every formulation selects and limits. A pause in study can let a familiar definition regain depth. What relation does it reveal? Where does an analogy cease to hold? Can the mind remain receptive without becoming indefinite? Through such questions, *Manas* learns to serve understanding rather than defend a possession. Its movement toward *Buddhi* becomes a movement toward more inclusive and discerning perception.

Svabhavat leaves us with the image of a living unity before its countless expressions. Father-Mother, Plastic Essence and spirit-substance each indicate something of that mystery, while none exhausts it. The value of study appears as our distinctions become more careful and our concern more comprehensive. We can approach the many forms of life with renewed respect, remembering that their differences arise within a deeper kinship. Such remembrance can give

thought greater spaciousness and make our participation in the world more attentive, responsible and kind.

Glossary

Absolute — The unconditioned Reality, beyond the limitations and distinctions of manifested existence.

Akasha — The subtle spiritual substance or medium of manifestation, distinguished from ordinary physical space and the lower astral light; *Akasa* is another spelling, and Akashic means pertaining to it.

Androgynous — Uniting masculine and feminine aspects within one being or symbol; the Father-Mother imagery concerns complementary powers of cosmic generation.

Archetype — An ideal pattern or prototype contemplated as prior to its particular expressions; archetypal means pertaining to such patterns.

Bhava — Being or becoming; used in the cited interpretation of *Svabhavat* for primordial substance considered in its inward movement.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or faculty of intuitive discernment; Buddhist means pertaining to it.

Cosmogony — An account of the origin and development of a cosmos.

Daiviprakritic Light — The divine light or energy associated with *Daiviprakriti*; Professor Iyer relates it to primordial force and pre-cosmic ideation.

Differentiation — The emergence of distinct forms, functions or levels from a less divided condition.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include more relationships, consequences and the needs of others.

Dzyan — Wisdom or spiritual knowledge; the *Stanzas of Dzyan* are the verses presented and interpreted in *The Secret Doctrine*.

Esoteric — Pertaining to an inward or occult interpretation of a teaching, distinguished from its outward formulation.

Father-Mother — A symbolic expression for complementary spiritual and substantial powers held together in a primordial unity; also written Mother-Father.

Fecundity — Fruitfulness or generative capacity; used of the rich possibilities of an ideal cosmos.

Fohat — The dynamic agency relating cosmic ideation to substance in Theosophical cosmology; Fohatic means pertaining to its activity.

Great Breath — A symbol of the cyclic manifestation and withdrawal of universes.

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

Hermes Trismegistes — The thrice-great Hermes of the Hermetic wisdom tradition; invoked by Professor Iyer in the comparison of Divine Thought and primordial Father-Mother.

Homogeneous / heterogeneous — Homogeneous means of a uniform nature; heterogeneous means differentiated or diverse. The quotations also use homogenous and heterogenous.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

Ideation — The activity of thought or the expression of ideal patterns; Divine Ideation concerns cosmic intelligence in the cited teaching.

Jagad Yoni — World-womb; discussed in the quotation as the material cause of the universe, with an esoteric emphasis on the ideal spirit of that cause.

Karana — Cause; in the *Svabhavat* quotation, a term used in discussing the source or basis of manifestation.

Lakshmi-Narayana — A Hindu divine pairing interpreted by Professor Iyer as the primordial Father-Mother, prior to differentiated worlds and beings; *Lakshminarayana* is the joined form.

Logos — Word or reason; in Theosophical metaphysics, an intelligible expression or ordering principle of manifestation. *Logoi* is the plural, and Logoic means pertaining to it.

Manas — The self-conscious thinking principle; in its higher sense, the reincarnating individuality. Manasic means pertaining to this principle.

Manifestation — The expression of differentiated existence from a subtler or unmanifest condition.

Matrix — An originating or encompassing field within which forms develop.

Metaphysics — Inquiry into the fundamental nature and principles of reality, including consciousness, causation and the relation of unity to multiplicity.

Mulaprakriti — Root-substance; the primordial basis of the objective aspect of manifestation, distinguished conceptually from the consciousness aspect associated with the *Logos*.

Mysterium tremendum — Latin for an awe-inspiring mystery; Professor Iyer uses it for the concealed source of manifestation that remains a veil upon the Absolute.

Nada Brahman — The Divine as Soundless Sound; *Nadabrahman* is the joined form in the quoted passage on primordial life and ideation.

Noumenal — Pertaining to an inward intelligible or spiritual ground, considered in relation to phenomenal expression; noumenon is the singular noun.

One Life — The universal unity of life underlying and expressed through the many lives and forms of Nature.

Parabrahmam / Parabrahman — The unconditioned Absolute beyond attributes and the distinction between subject and object; *Parabrahm* is another form in the sources.

Per se — Latin for in itself; used to distinguish a being's intrinsic nature from a particular conditioned expression.

Personality — The temporary identity, habits and instruments associated with a particular life, distinguished from enduring spiritual individuality.

Planes — Levels or orders of consciousness and substance within the Theosophical account of manifestation.

Plastic Essence — Formative and form-receptive primordial substance in Blavatsky's metaphysical terminology; plastic does not refer here to a manufactured material.

Prabhavapyaya — The plane from which the origination of things emerges and into which they are resolved, in the quoted explanation of primordial existence.

Pre-cosmic — Prior to the emergence of a manifested cosmos, within the metaphysical account.

Rig Veda — A foundational collection of Vedic hymns, including hymns to divine powers and hymns concerning cosmic origins.

Self-consciousness — The capacity to reflect upon one's own experience, intention and action; the sources distinguish personal and more universal degrees.

Septenate — A sevenfold group or order; used of correlated planes of substance and states of consciousness.

Stanzas of Dzyan — The archaic stanzas presented and interpreted in *The Secret Doctrine*.

Subjectivity / objectivity — The aspects of knowing consciousness and of what appears as an object; the quoted metaphysics examines their shared ground before differentiation.

Substance — The underlying material or field of manifestation in the metaphysical account; it is not restricted to ordinary physical matter.

Substratum — An underlying ground or basis; used of primordial substance before its differentiated expressions.

Sva — Self or one's own; Professor Iyer draws upon it to emphasize intrinsic unity in his interpretation of *Svabhavat*.

Svabhavat — Primordial spirit-substance or Plastic Essence in Theosophical cosmology; Professor Iyer interprets it through inexhaustible self-generation and the Father-Mother symbolism.

Vishnu — The divine preserver in Hindu tradition; *Mahavishnu* or *Maha Vishnu* emphasizes the cosmic scope of that principle.

Vishnu Purana — A traditional Hindu text concerning *Vishnu*, cosmology and sacred history.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 91.

“The primeval Father-Mother of the *Stanzas of Dzyan* is what the Hindus called *Lakshmi-Narayana*. In its state of pure potential in eternal duration and boundless space, it is prior to all worlds and beings. It is tellingly depicted in the *Rig Veda* as the One, the Alone, which breathes breathless by its own nature, and apart from which there is nothing whatsoever. *Lakshmi-Narayana* is signified by Buddhists as *Svabhavat* – noumenal, homogeneous, radiant substance – void of all attributes, but having the intrinsic, inexhaustible capacity of self-generation. More neutrally, it is the noumenon of spirit-matter, which is also the one force, the one life, and the abstract basis of all potential subjectivity and objectivity in the context of pre-cosmic ideation. The name 'Father-Mother' indicates its dynamic potential for cosmogonic creativity, and it is also known as the seven-vowelled sound, too sacred to pronounce, which must be seen as prior to all differentiation and which enshrines the ultimate mystery of all archetypal gestation.”

Meditation thought: Allow the Father-Mother image to suggest potential before division. Can thought remain attentive to a common source without immediately turning it into one more object among familiar things?

2. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 93.

“However, when we look at the etymology of the Sanskrit word *Svabhavat* – and no wonder Sanskrit is the language of the science of the future – we notice at the core of its meaning the idea of self-generation to an indefinite extent with inexhaustible potential, with immense and even immeasurable fecundity, and also its unitary nature, *sva*, as a single supreme substance or substratum, *bhava*, in a process of constant inner movement.”

Meditation thought: Consider self-generation as a metaphysical capacity rather than an act performed by a separate maker. What changes when becoming is contemplated from within a living unity?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 93.

“In the cosmogony of *Gupta Vidya* there is only one life, one force, one intelligence, one substance, which is the primordial one element. All of these are equivalent to each other. Just as Spinoza found the whole universe to be only one substance that equals both Nature and God, all of these are equivalent, a single substance. They, or rather IT, is prior to the distinctions between spirit and matter, and subject and object.”

Meditation thought: The passage asks us to begin before spirit and matter stand apart. Let the distinction remain useful while exploring the deeper relationship that makes both aspects intelligible.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 93.

“It is the luminosity hidden in darkness, reposing in eternal Duration in a condition of total latency or non-manifestation. It is outside any conceivable space or time matrix, and it is unrelated to anything we may call motion or causality. And yet, it is the one and only LIFE, because there is nothing else but itself. And, it is the sole source of worlds, beings, minds, forms and prototypes of anything and everything that can come into existence.”

Meditation thought: Latency need not mean emptiness. Sit with the possibility of unmanifest fullness, allowing the mind to acknowledge a mystery that its ordinary measures of space and time cannot settle.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 93.

“It is the ultimate mystery itself, the *mysterium tremendum* of which mystics speak. It is the mystery of non-spatial Space, nontemporal Duration and unconscious Consciousness. It is not the Absolute, but a veil upon Absoluteness, because it can potentially give rise to worlds and beings, whereas the Absolute *per se* is without any conceivable or possible relation to anything other than itself.”

Meditation thought: A veil can disclose something without containing the source. What freedom enters study when a helpful conception is held precisely, yet never mistaken for the reality beyond it?

6. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, pp. 93–94.

“Self-generation is not necessarily equivalent to self-consciousness, especially if it is innate in primordial spirit-matter or *Svabhavat*, which, though all-inclusive, homogeneous and universal, does not involve a conscious fusion of subject and object, their mutual interaction, or the union of the Knower, the Known and the process of Knowing.”

Meditation thought: Notice how readily thought supplies a knower and a known. The passage invites a more patient inquiry into the conditions that precede this familiar arrangement of experience.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 94.

“We should remember that 'the seven-skinned Mother-Father' is a symbol for all the emergent septenates, connected not only with planes of matter, but also with states of mind or being — the seven states of consciousness which correlate with seven planes of thought as well as of substance.”

Meditation thought: The sevenfold symbol relates states of being to planes of substance. Contemplate relationship first, allowing each term to acquire meaning within its own context before drawing further correspondences.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Primeval Self-Generation — Lakshminarayana”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 94.

“That is why Plato and Hermes Trismegistes would regard this Mother-Father as Divine Thought, the basis of eternal self-existence, which corresponds exactly to the older, magnificent, Hindu androgynous *Lakshmi-Narayana*. This would certainly be the paradigm of universal self-consciousness at the highest level of Deity, which is also the source and fount of life eternal, the light of the first *Logos*, sometimes called the unmanifested *Logos*, which is simultaneously pre-cosmic ideation, pre-cosmic root substance and primordial Fohatic force, or Daiviprakritic Light, the eternal Soundless Sound – *Nadabrahman*.”

Meditation thought: Different descriptions emphasize different aspects of the mystery. Can you follow a change of standpoint without demanding that one formulation cancel or exhaust the others?

9. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 46.

“*The Secret Doctrine* carries this idea into the region of metaphysics and postulates a ‘One Form of Existence’ as the basis and source of all things. But perhaps the phrase, the ‘One Form of Existence,’ is not altogether correct. The Sanskrit word is *Prabhavapyaya*, ‘the place, or rather plane, whence emerges the origination, and into which is the resolution of all things,’ says a commentator. It is not the ‘Mother of the World,’ as translated by Wilson (see Book I., *Vishnu Purana*); for *Jagad Yoni* (as shown by FitzEdward Hall) is scarcely so much ‘the Mother of the World’ or ‘the Womb of the World’ as the ‘Material Cause of the Universe.’ The Purânic Commentators explain it by *Karana* — ‘Cause’ — but the Esoteric philosophy, by the ideal spirit of that cause. It is, in its secondary stage, the *Svâbhâvat* of the Buddhist philosopher, the eternal cause and effect, omnipresent yet abstract, the self-existent plastic Essence and the root of all things, viewed in the same dual light as the Vedantin views his *Parabrahm* and *Mulaprakriti*, the one under two aspects.”

Meditation thought: A careful definition can deepen reverence. Attend to the distinction between a material cause and the ideal spirit of that cause, and ask what each expression is intended to illuminate.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Consciousness and Existence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 43.

“During the long night of non-manifestation, when the previous objective universe has dissolved into that *Karana* and is held in solution in space, which is filled with the unconscious pulsation of the Great Breath, the One Form of Existence is in causeless, dreamless sleep.”

Meditation thought: The long night of manifestation invites thought beyond a world of finished objects. Let the image of being held in solution loosen a rigid assumption about what possibility must look like.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — “Stanzas of Dzryan, II.5”, *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 28.

“The seven sons were not yet born from the web of light. Darkness alone was father-mother, *Svâbhâvat*; and *Svâbhâvat* was in darkness.”

Meditation thought: The web is not yet differentiated into its sons. Rest for a moment with the image of concealed light, allowing the symbol to remain spacious before explanation resumes.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 61.

“*Svâbhâvat*, the ‘Plastic Essence’ that fills the Universe, is the root of all things. *Svâbhâvat* is, so to say, the Buddhistic concrete aspect of the abstraction called in Hindu philosophy *Mulaprakriti*. It is the body of the Soul, and that which Ether would be to *Akasa*, the latter being the informing principle of the former.”

Meditation thought: Plastic Essence indicates a capacity for formative expression. Consider how the term unites substance with its informing principle, while keeping the metaphysical meaning distinct from ordinary physical material.