

Tanha and Trishna

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Tanha means craving, thirst, or the desire for sentient existence. In the standard Buddhist Twelve Links order, it is the eighth link. It follows *Vedana*, feeling or sensation, and conditions *Upadana*, grasping. This placement is exact. Feeling arises as pleasant, painful, or neutral. When pleasant feeling becomes “more,” painful feeling becomes “away,” and neutral feeling becomes “something must happen,” *Tanha* has begun.

H.P. Blavatsky defines *Tanha* as the thirst for life, the desire to live and cling to life on this earth, causing rebirth or reincarnation. The Sanskrit-Theosophical form used here is *Trishna*. Professor Iyer uses both *tanha* and *trishna*, and gives the term its deepest psychological force: it is the craving to exist in embodied form and the desire to exist as a separate being.

Tanha is not merely desire for a particular object. It is the deeper will to continue as “this” person, in “this” body, with “this” story, in “this” world of confirmations. It clings to body, image, possession, name, form, opinion, grievance, role, and future. It may appear as sensual hunger, but it may also appear as craving for certainty, importance, recognition, control, emotional repetition, or special suffering.

In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky associates *Tanha* with the personal Ego’s urge to rebuild the tabernacle of embodied existence. The image concerns the desire to continue a separative life. A dwelling shelters, but it can also become the place around which every anxiety gathers. The contemplative question is what makes us defend the house of personality as if nothing of value could exist beyond its walls.

This does not mean incarnation is evil. The body is a vehicle of experience, learning, and service. The error lies in clinging to embodiment as if form were the Self. Theosophy does not despise form; it warns against enslavement to form. *Tanha* binds because consciousness mistakes continuity of experience for spiritual being.

Professor Iyer says that because of the persistence of *tanha*, the elevation of consciousness beyond *Maya* is a long and difficult evolutionary process. This is a compassionate warning. Craving cannot be uprooted by a mood of disgust or a noble phrase. It has entered memory, body, imagination, identity, and social habit. It is in the desire to be praised, remembered, protected, agreed with, admired, needed, pitied, and continued.

“Death and Immortality” relates fierce craving for personal existence to separateness, violence and falsehood. Professor Iyer’s diagnosis concerns the possessive hold on life, bodily image and

name-and-form. It gives us a question for self-examination: does the need to preserve an image make dishonesty or coercion seem necessary? It gives no warrant for inferring another person's spiritual condition merely from fear, grief or illness.

This is why craving is inseparable from fear. One clings to possessions because one fears emptiness. One clings to reputation because one fears invisibility. One clings to the body because one fears dissolution. One clings to opinions because one fears groundlessness. When fear and craving reinforce each other, consciousness contracts.

Yet Professor Iyer also warns that aversion is itself a form of attachment. One does not overcome *Tanha* by hating life, hating the body, or hating oneself for craving. Hatred of survival may be only inverted attachment. The problem is not life; the problem is clinging. The problem is not form; the problem is mistaken identity.

In "The Pilgrimage of Humanity", Professor Iyer states that psychic drowsiness is due to the desire to exist as a separate being in a form, and that this thirst, *trishna*, is what all mystical training seeks to overcome. One must relinquish existence as physical or astral form, wandering mind, wavering heart, and all false, fickle, fleeting concerns induced by sense-objects.

The same passage gives the positive transformation: one must renounce the belief that one belongs to a restricted circle of friends and foes, while fulfilling obligations to every human being one encounters. This is the beautiful *Gupta Vidya* turn. The cure for *Tanha* is not withdrawal from humanity; it is widening of relation. The circle of "mine" and "not mine" must be broken.

Human Solidarity gives this widening an ethical direction. The people outside our preferred circle also have hopes, obligations and vulnerabilities. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception asks us to include their welfare when desire would reduce the situation to our own reassurance. Universal Brotherhood becomes a discipline of relation, requiring discernment about actions while refusing to treat people merely as supports or threats to personal continuity.

"Spiritual Perception" shows the higher transmutation. Professor Iyer asks whether one can develop such self-transcendence and concern for the spiritual welfare of all souls that one's entire conception of desire is revolutionized. Then one has no craving to treat another being as an object of sensuous gratification. Desire, once self-centered, becomes universal concern.

This is very practical. Craving often turns people into objects: objects of pleasure, approval, rescue, usefulness, rivalry, reassurance, or blame. One may say "I love you" while inwardly meaning "I need you to confirm me." One may say "I seek truth" while craving certainty, superiority, or spiritual identity. *Tanha* hides inside noble language unless motive is examined.

A person may repeatedly seek reassurance from someone they love, even after receiving a sincere answer. The relief passes, and the question returns. Here the distinction between affection and thirst becomes useful. Affection is concerned with the other person's life; thirst requires the person to keep repairing an inward uncertainty. Recognizing the difference need not bring shame. It may allow a request to be made honestly, without turning an endless demand into proof of love.

The same patience applies to spiritual aspiration. Wanting to understand and serve is not automatically *Tanha*. The important question is how the desire operates: whether it can accept correction and remain useful without the promised image of attainment. Study that makes us more receptive to truth is different from study that must continually confirm a special identity. The distinction becomes visible through conduct rather than through the nobility of the vocabulary employed.

The practical discipline begins in the pause. Feeling arises, and craving begins to form. The student notices: "This is thirst." That noticing weakens the chain. Pleasure can be received without demanding repetition. Pain can be felt without building identity. Uncertainty can be endured without grasping at false certainty. Love can be offered without possession.

Yoga psychology supplies the method. In "Samadhi Pada", Professor Iyer explains that thoughts, feelings, intentions, motives, and desires are *chittavrittis*, modifications of the mind. The psychology of self-emancipation means deliberate and self-conscious restraint of everything productive of mental confusion, weakness, and pain. This is not repression; it is disciplined freedom.

"The Pledge of Kwan-Yin" gives the compassionate culmination. Where a vow recognizes universal suffering and one chooses to make one's own suffering meaningful and creative for a larger purpose, the vow has self-correction built into it. *Kwan Yin* extinguishes the intensity of craving and the fires of nescience. Personal suffering is no longer used to feed self-enclosure; it becomes fuel for mercy.

Tanha binds because it contracts life around the personal center. Compassion liberates because it expands the center into the whole. The craving to be seen is purified into the wish to see truly. The craving to be loved is purified into the capacity to love. The craving to continue is transformed into fidelity to self-chosen duty.

The thirst for separative existence cannot be dissolved by declaring oneself free of it. It can be recognized more honestly and fed less automatically. A pleasure received with gratitude, a disappointment endured without coercion, and an obligation fulfilled without demanding recognition are modest occasions for that education. As the demand to possess life loosens, there

is more room to participate in it, and more freedom to care for beings whose lives cannot be made extensions of our own.

Glossary

Astral — Pertaining to the subtle formative or psychic dimension described in Theosophical teaching.

Buddha — An awakened one; in these essays, chiefly Gautama Buddha as teacher of the path beyond suffering.

Chittavrittis — Modifications or activities of the mind, discussed in Yoga psychology.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relationships, circumstances and responsibilities omitted by an isolated personal view.

Ego — A centre of self-reference; Theosophy distinguishes the enduring spiritual individuality from the temporary personal ego.

Gupta Vidya — Secret or esoteric wisdom; also the title of the collected essays of Professor Raghavan N. Iyer.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity, vulnerability and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility.

Kwan-Yin — The compassionate figure associated with hearing the cries of suffering beings; also written *Kwan Yin*.

Maya — The relative and conditioned character of appearances, misleading when mistaken for independent or absolute reality.

Moksha — Liberation or release from bondage; used with nirvana in the cited Theosophical exposition.

Nescience — Ignorance, especially the lack of spiritual understanding that sustains mistaken selfhood.

Nidana — A causal link or condition; the Twelve *Nidanas* describe the arising of conditioned existence. *Nidâna* is a historical spelling.

Nirvana — Liberation from the bondage sustained by ignorance and craving; *Nirvâna* is an older spelling.

Pali — The language of the Theravada Buddhist canon; the source of such forms as *Phassa* and *Vinnana*.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories and roles of one life, distinguished from the enduring individuality in Theosophy.

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

Reincarnation — Successive embodiment; in Theosophy, the continuing pilgrimage of the spiritual individuality through distinct personalities.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; in Yoga, a disciplined state with gradations of realization.

Sentient — Capable of experience or feeling.

Tabernacle — A dwelling or sanctuary; used figuratively for the embodied personality.

Tanha — Pali for thirst or craving, especially the thirst for continued personal existence in Theosophical exposition; the eighth link in dependent origination.

Trishna — Sanskrit for thirst or craving, corresponding to Pali *Tanha*; also written *Trishnâ* or *Trṣṇā*.

Ubiquity — Presence throughout a field; the cited essay speaks of the widespread reality of human suffering.

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

Upadana — Clinging or appropriation; the ninth link in dependent origination. *Upādāna* and *Upâdâna* are alternative spellings. Material cause is a distinct philosophical use.

Vedana — Feeling or sensation, particularly the pleasant, painful or neutral tone of experience; the seventh link. *Vedanā* and *Vêdâna* are alternate spellings.

Yoga — A discipline of integration and spiritual realization; in the cited discussion, the Yoga psychology of Patanjali.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, “Tanha”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 322.

“*Tanha* (Pali). The thirst for life. Desire to live and clinging to life on this earth. This clinging is that which causes rebirth or reincarnation.”

Meditation thought: The term names the thirst that clings to continued personal existence. Distinguish this compulsive hold from gratitude for life and responsibility for its care.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume II, p. 110.

“For it is this Ego, with its fierce Selfishness and animal desire to live a Senseless life (*Tanha*), which is ‘the maker of the tabernacle,’ as Buddha calls it in *Dhammapada* (153 and 154).”

Meditation thought: The tabernacle is an image of the personality continually rebuilt around desire. Consider what one is defending when a threatened image seems more important than truth.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 44.

“‘The Causes of Existence’ mean not only the physical causes known to science, but the metaphysical causes, the chief of which is the desire to exist, an outcome of *Nidana* and *Maya*.”

Meditation thought: The cause of existence is discussed on a metaphysical scale. Its relevance to self-study lies in examining the wish to continue as a separate centre of possession and demand.

4. R.N. Iyer, “Consciousness and Existence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, pp. 39–40.

“Even these extreme cases, however, are only an exaggerated and tragic form of *tanha*, the craving to exist in an embodied form. Buddha taught that existence is suffering, that the cause of suffering is craving and that the extinction of *tanha* is nirvana or *moksha*.”

Meditation thought: The passage states the Buddhist teaching through Professor Iyer’s Theosophical exposition. Let its severity direct honest inquiry into craving rather than judgment of a person in distress.

5. R.N. Iyer, “Consciousness and Existence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I, p. 40.

“Given the extreme persistence of *tanha*, it is a long and difficult evolutionary process to elevate consciousness beyond the realm of *maya*. Even human beings who have successfully generated a sense of selfhood independent of the body have attachments to the mind, through concepts, expectations and images.”

Meditation thought: Attachment can move from the body to concepts and images of selfhood. A refined object does not by itself make the manner of desiring it free.

6. R.N. Iyer, “Death and Immortality”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 244.

“Falsehood, violence, separateness are all rooted in the fierce craving for life, for personal existence. And when we begin to reflect upon this, we can see its significance.”

Meditation thought: The link between craving and harm is a question for motive-testing. Notice where fear for one’s image begins to make falsehood or coercion seem reasonable.

7. R.N. Iyer, "Death and Immortality", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 245.

"It is not necessary that he has to go from attachment to aversion. Aversion is itself a form of attachment. The man who denies loudly that he has any desire for life is deeply attached."

Meditation thought: Rejecting an object with hostility may preserve its rule over attention. Detachment requires understanding, not merely reversing attraction into aversion.

8. R.N. Iyer, "The Pilgrimage of Humanity", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 98.

"This psychic drowsiness is due to the desire to exist as a separate being in a form, and this thirst (*trishna*) is what all mystical training seeks to overcome."

Meditation thought: *Trishna* is here the thirst to remain a separate being in a form. The recognition can loosen possessiveness while making participation in shared life more deliberate.

9. R.N. Iyer, "The Pilgrimage of Humanity", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 98.

"One must renounce the belief that one belongs to a restricted circle of friends and foes, while fulfilling one's obligations to each and every human being one encounters the best one knows how."

Meditation thought: The circle of obligation extends beyond preferred companions. Ask how a decision changes when the welfare of an unfamiliar person is brought into view.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Spiritual Perception", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 145.

"Can one develop sufficient self-transcendence and such a profound concern for the spiritual welfare of all human souls that one's entire conception of desire is revolutionized?"

Meditation thought: Concern for the spiritual welfare of others changes the direction of desire. Its sincerity appears in the freedom and dignity allowed to the other person.

11. R.N. Iyer, "Spiritual Perception", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 145.

"When this becomes possible, one can be so creative and so saturated with universal compassion that one simply does not have any craving, let alone a compulsive need, to consider any other human being as a mere object for one's own sensuous gratification."

Meditation thought: A person ceases to be merely an object of gratification. Contemplate a form of affection that can hear another's needs without immediately converting them into demands for reassurance.

12. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan-Yin", *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 62.

"Where the vow involves a recognition of the ubiquity of human suffering and where one chooses to make one's own suffering meaningful and creative for a larger purpose, the vow has self-correction built into it."

Meditation thought: The vow carries a principle of self-correction because its purpose exceeds private progress. Returning to that purpose can make a disappointment less enclosing.