

Tetraktys

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Tetraktys is the Pythagorean sacred four, represented by ten points arranged in four successive rows of one, two, three and four. The figure gathers unity, differentiation and completeness into a single contemplative image. Its ten points form a triangle, while the number four names the succession through which that completeness is expressed. In Theosophical study, the *Tetraktys* becomes a way of considering how an ordered multiplicity proceeds from unity, and how the human being may learn to participate consciously in that order.

H.P. Blavatsky's *Theosophical Glossary* describes the *Tetraktys* as a sacred and deeply significant emblem. Her account places the familiar Pythagorean figure within a wider field of ancient religious and philosophical symbolism. Such comparisons invite attentive study. A resemblance among sacred numbers can suggest a question, but the meaning of a symbol must still be understood within its particular tradition. The student gains more from discovering the work a symbol performs than from collecting correspondences whose differences have been overlooked.

The elementary numerical movement is readily grasped. One indicates unity, two introduces distinction and relation, three makes a triadic relation possible, and four completes the series whose sum is ten. A geometrical analogy associates the point with position, the line with extension, the surface with two dimensions and the solid with three. Four points can define a tetrahedron when they do not lie in one plane. The analogy concerns successive conditions of spatial expression; it does not mean that a number has literally manufactured a physical object.

The figure can be contemplated in both directions. Beginning from the single point, attention follows the emergence of relationship and complexity. Beginning with the ten, it asks how the whole remains intelligible through the relations among its parts. Neither direction permits the original unity to be treated as merely one isolated item among the others. Its symbolic function is generative and integrative. This is why the diagram can remain suggestive after its arithmetic has become completely familiar. Understanding its sum is the beginning of the inquiry. The next step is to consider what kind of attention can perceive a whole without losing the distinct relationships that give it expression.

Theosophical interpretations give this inquiry a metaphysical depth. In "Spectator and Participant," Professor Iyer approaches the divine *Tetraktys* through the Father-Mother, the *Ah-hi* and the *Manasaputras*. The symbolism concerns stages or aspects of cosmic intelligence and manifestation. Elsewhere he develops the relation of *Agni*, *Vayu* and *Surya* to their underlying

unity. Such presentations help the student distinguish a source, its primary differentiations and their further expression. Their correspondences must be followed in context, without forcing every group of four into one rigid scheme.

An equally important distinction separates a manifested or intelligible unity from the unconditioned Absolute. Number belongs to relations that thought can contemplate. The Absolute cannot be enclosed within a diagram or counted as its first object. A sacred figure may turn attention toward what exceeds thought, while remaining a figure within thought. Respecting this limit prevents symbolism from becoming a substitute for the mystery it serves. The mind can use a clear conception and still recognize that reality is not exhausted by its clarity.

In “Negation and Transcendence,” Professor Iyer connects the *Tetraktys* with a unity that relates spirit, spiritual discernment and mind. This has a direct bearing on the human constitution. Thinking, feeling and acting are often experienced as separate or competing activities. We may understand a duty, resist it emotionally and postpone it in conduct. An integrated life requires these powers to become responsive to a purpose worthy of them. Unity here is a task of conscious relationship, discovered through practice rather than declared by a formula.

The Pythagorean discipline therefore gives moral purification a central place. Professor Iyer's account of the school joins intellectual inquiry to the cultivation of character, including the lives and achievements of women within that tradition. The study of number belongs to a larger education of the soul. Accuracy, restraint, friendship and fidelity to truth prepare the mind to understand order without reducing it to an instrument of personal advantage. A beautiful conception gains human significance through the life that becomes capable of receiving it.

Consider the ordinary undertaking of making a promise. There is an intention, an understanding of what the promise requires, a spoken commitment and the action that fulfils it. These are distinguishable moments within one responsibility. If the words exceed the intention, or the action repeatedly contradicts the words, the undertaking loses coherence. The example is an analogy rather than an ancient numerical correspondence. It shows how the contemplation of unity can lead us to examine the relationships through which an ideal acquires a trustworthy expression.

The same inquiry applies to shared work. A group may possess knowledge, enthusiasm, materials and opportunities, yet accomplish little because its efforts do not support one another. A clear purpose helps reveal where proportion is missing. Someone may need room to contribute; another may need to listen; a promising idea may require patient preparation. Order need not mean uniformity or domination. It can mean an arrangement in which distinct capacities are brought into fruitful relation and the purpose of the whole remains visible to each participant.

Human Solidarity gives this understanding an ethical foundation. The points of the figure invite us to consider plurality within a common order, while actual human beings require more than a pleasing analogy. Each has an inward life, a history and needs that deserve attention. A conception of unity becomes humane when it increases our care for those particulars. We can ask whose contribution has been obscured, whose burden is taken for granted, and how cooperation might make greater room for the dignity of every person involved.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception also helps when one faculty has come to dominate our judgment. Intellectual brilliance may disregard tenderness; generous feeling may neglect consequences; determined action may outrun understanding. A larger circle allows these powers to correct and enrich one another. We need not weaken a strength to acknowledge what it lacks. We can place it within a more comprehensive discipline, asking what other qualities are needed for its responsible use. The search for proportion then becomes a form of practical self-knowledge.

Contemplation can begin simply with the ten-point figure held steadily in thought. The student observes its arrangement, considers the relations it suggests and returns from wandering associations to a chosen question. What does unity mean when differences are preserved? How does a purpose remain present through successive expressions? The value of the exercise lies in attentive and discriminating reflection. Counting points or repeating a sacred name does not by itself confer insight. The practice becomes fruitful as its meaning is tested in the conduct of life.

Professor Iyer's account of the Pythagorean school finally directs the seeker toward the mysteries within. This inward turn asks for a consciousness capable of harmony, rather than a collection of symbols owned as intellectual property. *Manas* can learn to discern relations with increasing precision, while *Buddhi* gives that discrimination a more universal and compassionate reach. The sacred four offers a small, exact image for an immense inquiry. Its enduring invitation is to bring our many powers into clearer relationship, so that thought, speech and action may express a more coherent service to life.

Glossary

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

Ad / Ad-ad — Names used for the unspoken One in Blavatsky's quoted interpretation of the Babylonian system.

Agni — Fire; the Vedic divine figure associated with sacred fire and creative spiritual energy.

Ah-hi — Spiritual intelligences that contain and reflect universal ideation in the cited cosmology.

Amitabha — The *Buddha* of boundless light in Buddhist symbolism; Professor Iyer invokes the name in contemplating the spiritual ground and purpose of evolution.

Anata, Belta and Davkina — Divine consorts of *Anu*, *Bel* and *Hea* respectively in the quoted comparative account.

Anu — *Anu* or *Ana* is a divine figure in the Babylonian comparison quoted from *Isis Unveiled*; the name here does not mean the Sanskrit atom.

Arba — Four; the designation used in the quoted comparative account for the completed divine group.

Astral — Pertaining to a subtle plane or vehicle, particularly the formative pattern underlying physical embodiment.

Atma / Atman — Universal Spirit or Self; the highest principle in the Theosophical human constitution, distinguished from the personal identity.

Avalokiteshvara — A figure of compassionate spiritual regard, the lord who looks down upon beings; *Avalokiteshwara* is the spelling in the quotation.

Bel / Elu — The active or formative divine power in the Babylonian comparison quoted by Blavatsky.

Bodhisattva — An awakened being devoted to the welfare and enlightenment of all; in the cited Theosophical interpretation, a member of the compassionate spiritual Brotherhood.

Buddha — An awakened or enlightened being; *Buddhas* in the quoted *Tetraktys* passage are contemplated with bodhisattvas around a common spiritual centre.

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

Causal body — The enduring spiritual vehicle considered in relation to *Buddhi* and higher *Manas*; the term has different technical uses in different systems.

Correspondence — A meaningful relation between different orders or levels; an instrument of analogy that requires attention to context.

Decad — A group of ten; in the *Tetraktys*, the sum of one, two, three and four.

Deity Yoga — Contemplative spiritual practice using a divine or enlightened form; in the quotation, related to the formation of a perfected spiritual vesture.

Demiurge — The formative or ordering intelligence of a cosmos; Professor Iyer uses the term in relation to the Second *Logos*.

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.

Duad — A pair or twofold differentiation; used in the numerical interpretation of unity and manifestation.

Emanation — An unfolding or radiation from a source, distinguished in the teaching from manufacture by an external maker.

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

Fons et origo — Latin for source and origin.

Guhya — Secret or hidden; used of spiritual realities requiring inward assimilation.

Hea / Hoa — The wisdom principle, also associated with sea and underworld, in the cited Babylonian comparison.

Hiranyagarbha-Prajapati — The cosmic egg considered in relation to the creative Lord of beings; a combined symbol in the quoted cosmology.

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.

Immanence — Presence within the manifested world or its beings; distinguished from transcendence, which exceeds particular manifestations.

Ineffable — Beyond adequate expression in words.

Kosmos — The universe considered as an ordered whole.

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

Manasaputras — Sons of Mind; spiritual intelligences associated with the awakening of self-conscious *Manas* in humanity.

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

Mantram — A sacred formula or invocation; a spelling related to mantra in the quoted sources.

Manvantara — A period of manifestation and activity, contrasted with *pralaya*; manvantaric means pertaining to such a period.

Monad — The spiritual unit or pilgrim, commonly related to *Atma-Buddhi*; its essential unity is distinguished from the changing vehicles through which evolution proceeds.

Monas — Greek for a unit or unity; used in the quoted numerical and cosmological comparisons.

Mylitta / Ishtar — The Great Mother in the Babylonian comparison; added to the three male deities to form the sacred four in that interpretation.

Mysteries — Sacred spiritual teachings and disciplines, distinguished in the essays from the ceremonies that symbolize them.

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

Paramatman — The Supreme or universal Self, contemplated beyond personal identity and mirrored in the embodied Self, *Jivatman*.

Phenomenal — Pertaining to manifested appearances; phenomena is the plural noun.

Pralaya — A period of dissolution or rest between cycles of manifested activity.

Purgation — Purification or cleansing; in the cited spiritual discussion, the clarification of motives and release of limiting habits.

Quaternion — A group of four; used here as a name of the sacred four in Pythagorean symbolism.

Sakti — Power or energy, especially the feminine divine potency; Saktis is the plural, and *Shakti* is another transliteration.

Sat-Chit-Ananda — Truth or being, consciousness or ideation, and bliss; a triadic designation of the Supreme Reality in the quoted interpretation.

Self-Knowledge — Knowledge of the spiritual Self, joined in practice to examination of motive and conduct.

Spiritual Sun — The inward source of spiritual illumination contemplated beyond the visible solar orb in Theosophical symbolism.

Sublunary — Below the moon; in the historical cosmological vocabulary, the terrestrial domain of changing and generated things.

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

Superficies — A surface; used in the quoted geometrical account to distinguish a two-dimensional figure from a line or solid.

Surya — The Sun in Vedic tradition; in the Theosophical interpretation, a symbol of spiritual illumination whose visible expression reflects a deeper source.

Svayambhuva — Self-existent or self-born; *Swayambhuva* is another spelling in the quoted sources.

Tanka — A Tibetan religious painting or sacred image; *tankas* is the plural in the comparison used by Professor Iyer.

Tetrad — A group of four; in the *Tetraktys* symbolism, the sacred four considered as a complete relation of aspects.

Tetragrammaton — The four-letter divine name in Hebrew tradition; compared with the sacred four in Blavatsky's discussion of the *Tetraktys*.

Tetrahedron — A solid bounded by four triangular faces and having four vertices; used in the essay to make the geometrical analogy precise.

Tetraktys — The Pythagorean sacred four, represented by ten points in four rows; *Tetractys* is another spelling used in Theosophical interpretation.

Triad — A group of three; its members depend upon context, including *Atma*, *Buddhi* and *Manas* in the higher human constitution.

Trimurti — A threefold divine expression; the cited contexts use *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*, or the triad of *Agni*, *Vayu* and *Surya*.

Vayu — The wind deity; in the cited cosmic triad, spiritual air.

Vedas — Ancient Indian sacred texts associated with spiritual knowledge and revelation; Vedic means pertaining to them.

Verbum — Latin for Word; used of divine expression or the *Logos*.

Vesture — A sheath, vehicle or instrument through which consciousness is expressed; vestures is the plural.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, pp. 328–329, “Tetraktys”.

“*Tetraktys* (Gr.) or the Tetrad. The sacred ‘Four’ by which the Pythagoreans swore, this being their most binding oath. It has a very mystic and varied signification, being the same as the Tetragrammaton. First of all it is Unity, or the ‘One’ under four different aspects; then it is the fundamental number Four, the Tetrad containing the Decad, or Ten, the number of perfection; finally it signifies the primeval Triad (or Triangle) merged in the divine Monad.”

Meditation thought: The sacred four gathers different aspects within unity. Which relation among your own powers needs attention so that a worthy purpose can receive a more complete expression?

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 329, “Tetraktys”.

“The mystic Decad, the resultant of the *Tetraktys*, or the $1+2+3+4=10$, is a way of expressing this idea. The One is the impersonal principle ‘God’; the Two, matter; the Three, combining Monad and Duad and partaking of the nature of both, is the phenomenal world; the Tetrad, or form of perfection, expresses the emptiness of all; and the Decad, or sum of all, involves the entire Kosmos.”

Meditation thought: Move in thought from one through four and return from ten to unity. What does the movement reveal about the difference between a collection of parts and an intelligible whole?

3. R.N. Iyer — “Spectator and Participant”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 315.

“Here speaks the voice of the primordial Mysteries, the voice of all the self-shining Initiates who speak by thinking and think by ideating. Arrayed around a common ineffable centre, like the *Buddhas* and *Bodhisattvas* in Tibetan *tankas*, they are ceaselessly engaged in fathomless meditation. Through their adoration and compassion they continually point to *Amitabha*, to *Avalokiteshwara*, the one Source and the primordial Flame. This is the divine *Tetraktys*, the sacred four, the eternal self-existent One called the concealed Lord and also known as the androgyne Father-Mother, the direct emanation from the primordial Flame. From this emanate the primordial seven, the highest *Ah-Hi*, the divine breaths; from those emanate the *Manasaputras* as well as the builders of form. The primordial seven, the highest beings on the scale of existence, latent during *pralaya* and active during *manvantara*, constitute the ray of the *Tetraktys*, which is eternal in essence and periodic in manifestation.”

Meditation thought: The image places many awakened beings around an ineffable centre. Let it suggest cooperation whose strength comes from a shared purpose greater than any participant's claim to importance.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Spectator and Participant”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 316.

“From that One and the egg, the inseparable and androgyne *Hiranyagarbha-Prajapati*, emanate the Three-in-One, the *Tetraktys* or sacred Four. The original triune rays in the *Tetraktys* are the primeval Vedic *Trimurti* of *Agni*, *Vayu* and *Surya* – spiritual fire, spiritual air and spiritual sun. From these emanate the other seven. Together they constitute either the seven or the ten, depending upon how one counts the original Three-in-One. However reckoned, one must not emphasize any separation between *Agni*, *Vayu* and *Surya* or between these three and the primordial seven, the *Ah-Hi*.”

Meditation thought: Hold the three rays together in their common source. In practical life, where might an apparent division become more intelligible when the purpose uniting its different functions is remembered?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Spectator and Participant”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 316.

“It is best to think of them as one while meditating at dawn, at sunset, at midday and midnight. Whether one employs a sacred mantram or invocation to draw one's entire attention to the great Mystery, or whether one has the idea of it so impacted in the consciousness that it may be linked to anything before the mind's eye, this is the path of those who are serious about living a life of constant gratitude. Once a taste for it is developed, it is pure bliss. It is better to spend time in gratitude than in brooding over the shadow. At the highest level of maintaining a current of ideation, where one becomes a true man of meditation in silence, the One, the egg, the Three-in-One, the seven and the ten are all comprehended within the supreme *Paramatman*, called *guhya* or secret. Even in thinking of it one must exercise reticence, never thinking about it carelessly or mechanically. It must be assimilated and allowed to cohere in secret.”

Meditation thought: Gratitude can become a steady orientation of thought. Choose a moment to return quietly to the whole, then let that remembrance improve the care given to a particular responsibility.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Negation and Transcendence”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 355.

“The forever concealed, primal triune differentiation, not from, but in the one Absolute, is symbolized by the Sacred Four or the Divine *Tetractys*. In the metaphysical world it is the unit ray or *Atman*. It is *Atman*, the highest spirit in man which, in conjunction with *Buddhi* and *Manas*, is called the upper Triad or Trinity. We must carefully distinguish between, on the one hand, the forever concealed primal triune differentiation in the Absolute — *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, Truth-Intellection-Bliss in the metaphysical world beyond the unmanifest and the manifest, symbolized, since Pythagoras, by the Divine *Tetractys*, unthinkable and unspeakable, the Holiest of the Holy, and, on the other hand, the Unit Ray which is contained in the One point — the universal, immutable, eternal and Absolute Unity.”

Meditation thought: Attend to the distinctions within the passage before combining its symbols. Precision can protect contemplation from premature certainty and leave room for what the mind cannot yet encompass.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Pythagoras and His School”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 138.

“The vital essence of the Pythagorean teaching was to encourage the emergence of whole men and women. They cannot be manufactured, but must truly create themselves. Great Teachers assist in the self-production of whole human beings by making a holistic teaching come alive.”

Meditation thought: Wholeness cannot be manufactured for another person. What kind of help would strengthen someone's own capacity to understand, choose and bring a worthwhile possibility into expression?

8. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 616.

“It consists of ten points inscribed pyramid-like (from one to the last four) within its three lines, and it symbolizes the Universe in the famous Pythagorean Decad. The upper single dot is a Monad, and represents a Unit-Point, which is the Unity from whence all proceeds, and all is of the same essence with it. While the ten dots within the triangle represent the phenomenal world, the three sides of the equilateral triangle which enclose the pyramid of dots are the barriers of noumenal Matter, or Substance, that separate it from the world of Thought.”

Meditation thought: Look at the ten points in relation to their enclosing triangle. Let the image invite an inquiry into the conditions that make a manifested order possible, rather than merely a count of its elements.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Transcendence and Transformation”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 356.

“To understand the seven hidden points, one should attend to the six small triangles that can be formed within the Decad surrounding its central point. Each of these triangles has a central point of its own, and in addition, the midpoint at the base represents a seventh hidden point. The alchemical significance of these hidden points relates to the creation, through Deity Yoga, of a permanent divine vesture or Buddha-body. Sometimes misleadingly and loosely called the permanent astral, this vesture is an exact replica of the inmost causal body of the perfected man. Certainly, a conception so central to mystical training cannot have a merely mechanical or external interpretation. Thus, the seven hidden points within the Pythagorean Decad must, like all meta-geometric conceptions, be understood in relation to the concept of metaphysical depth.”

Meditation thought: Hidden points suggest a depth beyond the visible arrangement. Allow the symbol to turn attention toward inward transformation, while remembering that a geometric description alone cannot accomplish it.

10. *The Pythagorean Triangle*, quoted by H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 616.

“Pythagoras considered a point to correspond in proportion to unity; a line to 2; a superficies to 3; a solid to 4; and he defined a point as a Monad having position, and the beginning of all things; a line was thought to correspond with duality, because it was produced by the first motion from indivisible nature, and formed the junction of two points. A superficies was compared to the number three because it is the first of all causes that are found in figures; for a circle, which is the principal of all round figures, comprises a triad, in centre — space — circumference. But a triangle, which is the first of all rectilineal figures, is included in a ternary, and receives its form according to that number; and was considered by the Pythagoreans to be the creator of all sublunary things. The four points at the base of *the Pythagorean triangle* correspond with a solid or cube, which combines the principles of length, breadth, and thickness, for no solid can have less than four extreme boundary points.”

Meditation thought: Follow the passage from position through extension and form. Where does a symbolic correspondence illuminate an idea, and where must careful thought preserve the distinction between analogy and literal geometry?

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. II, p. 146.

“To place it still clearer, the Babylonian System recognizes first — the ONE (*Ad*, or *Ad-ad*), who is never named, but only acknowledged in thought as the Hindu *Swayambhuva*. From this he becomes manifest as *Anu* or *Ana* — the one above all — *Monas*. Next comes the Demiurge called *Bel* or *Elu*, who is the active power of the Godhead. The third is the principle of Wisdom, *Hea* or *Hoa*, who also rules the sea and the underworld. Each of these has his divine consort, giving us *Anata*, *Belta*, and *Davkina*. These, however, are only like the Saktis, and not especially remarked by theologians. But the female principle is denoted by *Mylitta*, the Great Mother, called also *Ishtar*. So with the three male gods, we have the Triad or *Trimurti*, and with *Mylitta* added, the *Arba* or Four (*Tetraktys* of Pythagoras), which perfects and potentializes all.”

Meditation thought: Read each name within the comparison it serves. A recurring triad or fourfold group can invite discovery, provided the differences among traditions remain available to patient study.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Pythagoras and His School”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, pp. 137–138.

“Pythagoras taught that unless the Mysteries are found within oneself, they cannot speak to one. All must make their own experiments with truth. They must make their own exercises in the calming of the passions, the controlling of the mind, the concentration of the thinking principle, and above all, the purgation and purification of their motives, intentions, feelings, likes and dislikes. This must be done for the sake of fusing the whole of one's being into an overriding thought-feeling, one keynote vibration which becomes a sacred *verbum*, moving and animating the entire manifested self. All human beings have a unique and privileged access to the *verbum* within the sanctuary of their own consciousness in deep sleep, in daily

meditation, in waking life, in golden moments, but, above all, when they begin to enter into a current of continuous thought and meditation upon the holiest of all subjects, which has to do with the *fons et origo* of all living things and beings. When they do this, then they will begin to understand the *Tetraktys* or sacred Quaternion, the Number of numbers."

Meditation thought: Bring the inquiry home to motive. What recurring intention could be purified so that your many activities become more coherent expressions of a purpose worthy of sustained devotion?