

The Fourth Round

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

The Fourth Round is the fourth great circuit of life through the seven globes of a planetary chain in Theosophical cosmology. Humanity on Earth is described as participating in this circuit, with our globe occupying the fourth position, designated Globe D. The doctrine places human development within immense rhythms of manifestation, experience and spiritual unfolding. Its practical interest lies in the condition it attributes to present humanity: powers of thought and action have developed sufficiently to carry grave responsibilities, while wisdom remains a work in progress.

Several terms must be distinguished at the outset. A planetary chain comprises seven globes understood as related fields of evolution on different planes. A round is a circuit through those globes. A root race is a major phase of humanity's development during its period on a globe. The fourth globe, the Fourth Round and the Fourth Root Race therefore name different things. Their numerical relationships form part of the teaching, but they cannot be exchanged as if they were three names for the same event.

The globes are not simply seven familiar planets, and the movement through them is not a physical journey by a population of travellers. The account concerns the passage and development of life through successive conditions of manifestation. H.P. Blavatsky describes our Earth as the fulcrum of the chain's balance, with no companion globe on the same plane. This refers to the place of Globe D in the septenary arrangement. It does not mean that the Fourth Round contains only one globe or that the other globes have ceased to participate.

The rounds are presented as a movement into material differentiation followed by an increasing spiritualization of developed faculties. The fourth occupies the central position in that sevenfold succession. Within the account, the great turning point on Earth lies in the middle of the Fourth Root Race of the Fourth Round, and present humanity belongs predominantly to the Fifth Root Race. These are claims within esoteric cosmology, rather than a chronology established by geology or anthropology. Understanding their intended relationships is necessary before considering their philosophical meaning.

One central relationship concerns the difference between a spiritual capacity and its conscious development through experience. The teaching describes an original spiritual inheritance that does not yet amount to the self-conscious wisdom of perfected humanity. Embodiment provides a field in which intelligence, choice and responsibility can unfold. Greater material capability may coexist with a diminished awareness of spiritual unity. The resulting tension helps explain

why technical ingenuity alone cannot determine the quality of a civilization. Its powers require purposes and restraints that ingenuity cannot supply by itself.

In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky distinguishes the development of *Manas* in the present Round from its fuller development in the Fifth. The statement should be read within that long evolutionary framework. It does not deny the reality of present human thought. Rather, it suggests that our capacities remain partial, mixed and capable of further transformation. We can reason brilliantly while failing to examine a motive, or understand a principle without embodying it. Recognizing this incompleteness can encourage a more exacting use of the faculties we already possess.

The teaching also speaks of a door into the human kingdom closing during the cycle. In context, this concerns the admission of new entrants from lower kingdoms into that stage of the evolutionary process. It does not close the door upon learning, moral growth or compassion among existing human beings. Nor does it authorize us to classify people as spiritually disposable. The wider doctrine attributes an immense destiny to every human soul. Its distinctions must be studied in a way consistent with that universal horizon.

Professor Iyer's "Evolution and Karma" and "Involution" place development within the interaction of spiritual, intellectual and physical processes. Evolution is more than a change in outward form. It includes the unfolding of consciousness and the consequences of its choices. The physical instrument matters because thought and intention act through it, while those inward powers also help shape its future use. The student is asked to consider reciprocal relationships, rather than imagine matter developing alone and meaning being added after the work is complete.

"The Descent of Manas" brings this perspective to the responsibility of humanity toward the lower kingdoms. Human consciousness has a degree of deliberative freedom that magnifies the consequences of its actions. We can investigate conditions, foresee some effects and change a practice. These capacities create duties toward the life affected by our decisions. The doctrine's vast scale therefore returns us to the quality of a particular action: what do we know, what have we neglected to find out, and who or what will bear the consequences?

Consider a shared project that alters a place. Efficiency and immediate convenience are relevant, but so are the people who depend upon it, the living habitat and the resources required to maintain the result. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means bringing these relationships into the deliberation before enthusiasm becomes irreversible momentum. It requires observation and practical knowledge. A spiritual view of evolution can supply a reason to care, while responsible planning must still discover the actual conditions and respond to them with competence.

Human Solidarity likewise prevents the doctrine of karma from becoming a judgment pronounced upon someone else's suffering. We do not possess a complete account of the causes within another person's life. What is available is our present responsibility to respond with intelligence and compassion. The recognition of a shared evolutionary pilgrimage can deepen that response. People differ in circumstance and capacity, yet all participate in unfinished development. We can uphold standards of conduct while helping create conditions in which learning, repair and renewed effort become possible.

The Fourth Round may thus be contemplated as a condition of consequential incompleteness. We have enough power to do great good or harm, and enough inward freedom to question the purposes we serve. The presence of conflict does not by itself establish progress. What matters is how consciousness works through it. A disagreement can deepen hostility or become an occasion for greater fairness. A discovery can serve domination or shared well-being. The direction is influenced by the motives, institutions and habits through which human powers are exercised.

Professor Iyer's discussion of *Atma Vidya* gives this task an inward centre. Self-knowledge concerns the relation between the changing personality and a universal spiritual principle. As *Manas* becomes more responsive to *Buddhi*, discrimination can be joined to compassion and action to a less possessive purpose. This transformation requires attention to ordinary choices. A person can practise restraint before speaking, revise an unfair judgment or complete a neglected duty. The scale is small enough to work with, while the quality of consciousness cultivated is central to the larger teaching.

The doctrine finally places present humanity between an inheritance it has not fully understood and a possibility it has not yet realized. That position invites patience with the length of growth and seriousness about the use of today. We need not imagine ourselves able to oversee a cosmic cycle in order to improve the part of life entrusted to our care. The Fourth Round becomes spiritually fruitful when its vast perspective strengthens an immediate resolve: to use developing powers more wisely, help fellow learners and leave the shared field of experience more hospitable to those who follow.

Glossary

Anthropology — The study of humanity; occult or esoteric anthropology here means the Theosophical account of human origins and development.

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

Atlantean — Pertaining to Atlantis and the Fourth Root Race in the historical Theosophical account of human evolution.

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

Atma Vidya — Knowledge of the spiritual Self; Professor Iyer calls it the noetic psychology of *Gupta Vidya*. Also written *Atma-Vidya*.

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

Cognition — Knowing or the act of knowing; cogniser names the knower, and cognised refers to what is known.

Cosmology — An account or study of the order, constitution and development of the universe.

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.

Elementals — Lives or forces of Nature associated with the formation and activity of the lower instruments; their functions differ from human self-consciousness.

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

Fifth Root Race — The present major humanity-cycle in Theosophical cosmology, associated with the education of self-conscious mind within the Fourth Round.

Fifth-Rounders — Beings whose spiritual-intellectual development is described as anticipating a later round in the Theosophical evolutionary account.

Fourth Root Race — The Atlantean humanity-cycle in Theosophical cosmology, preceding the Fifth Root Race within the Fourth Round.

Globe — A sphere or field of evolution within a planetary chain; Globe D is the fourth member, identified with Earth in the account.

Guru — A spiritual teacher; gurus is the plural. In these essays, the relationship calls for responsible learning and discernment.

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

Incarnation — The embodiment of an enduring principle or individuality in a particular life.

Incipient — Beginning to arise or develop.

Involution — Involvement or unfolding into conditions of manifestation; the direction and application depend on the cycle or standpoint being discussed.

Karma — The continuity of action, cause and consequence; karmic law gives moral responsibility a wider field of relations.

Linga sharira — The astral model or formative double of the physical body; *Linga sarira* is a spelling variant.

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.

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.

Mutatis mutandis — Latin for with the necessary changes made; used when a pattern is applied to related but distinct levels of a cosmological scheme.

Noetic — Pertaining to the higher mind and spiritual cognition, distinguished from merely personal or reactive mental activity.

Obscuration — A period of relative rest or suspended activity for a globe or its evolving life in the cyclic account.

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.

Planetary chain — A sevenfold series of related globes or fields of evolution on different planes in Theosophical cosmology.

Root Race — A major phase of humanity's development during its period on a globe in the Theosophical scheme; the term does not establish the spiritual worth of present-day ethnic groups.

Round — A circuit of the evolutionary life-wave through the seven globes of a planetary chain in Theosophical cosmology.

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

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

Septenary — Sevenfold; used of the human constitution and of cosmic principles or hierarchies.

Sub-Race — A subdivision within a root-race cycle in the historical Theosophical terminology; not a basis for judging living peoples.

Supernal — Belonging to a higher or heavenly order.

Theurgy — Spiritual or divine action; in these passages, the work of transformation through purified consciousness and will.

Third Root Race — The major phase of humanity associated in Theosophical cosmology with the awakening of self-conscious mind and the Lemurian narrative during Earth's Fourth Round.

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

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. A Master's letter, quoted by H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 189.

"IV. Round. Intellect has an enormous development in this Round. The (hitherto) dumb races acquire our (present) human speech on this globe, on which, from the Fourth Race, language is perfected and knowledge increases. At this half-way point of the Fourth Round (as of the Fourth Root, or Atlantean, race) humanity passes the axial point of the minor *Manvantara* cycle ... the world teeming with the results of intellectual activity and spiritual decrease."

Meditation thought: Greater intellect brings a question about its direction. Where has an increase in capability created a corresponding need for restraint, compassion or a more comprehensive understanding of consequences?

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 182.

"The student hardly needs any further explanation on the part played by the fourth Globe and the fourth Round in the scheme of evolution. From the preceding diagrams, which are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to Rounds, Globes or Races, it will be seen that the fourth member

of a series occupies a unique position. Unlike the others, the Fourth has no ‘sister’ Globe on the same plane as itself, and it thus forms the fulcrum of the ‘balance’ represented by the whole chain. It is the sphere of final evolutionary adjustments, the world of Karmic scales, the Hall of Justice, where the balance is struck which determines the future course of the Monad during the remainder of its incarnations in the cycle.”

Meditation thought: The fulcrum image places present action within a balance of causes. Consider one decision whose future effects deserve more attention before convenience determines the choice.

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 182.

“And therefore it is, that, after this central turning-point has been passed in the Great Cycle, — i.e., after the middle point of the Fourth Race in the Fourth Round on our Globe — no more Monads can enter the human kingdom. The door is closed for this Cycle and the balance struck.”

Meditation thought: Read the closing door within the cycle described by the teaching. Then return to the opportunities for learning and service that remain open in the actual human relationship before you.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 182.

“The most developed Monads (the lunar) reach the human germ-stage in the first Round; become terrestrial, though very ethereal human beings towards the end of the Third Round, remaining on it (the globe) through the ‘obscuration’ period as the seed for future mankind in the Fourth Round, and thus become the pioneers of Humanity at the beginning of this, the Fourth Round.”

Meditation thought: The pioneers preserve a seed through an interval of rest. What useful capacity or understanding could you maintain quietly so that a future undertaking has something sound from which to begin?

5. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. I, p. 183.

“Meanwhile man — or rather his Monad — has existed on the earth from the very beginning of this Round. But, up to our own Fifth Race, the external shapes which covered those divine astral doubles changed and consolidated with every sub-race; the form and physical structure of the fauna changing at the same time, as they had to be adapted to the ever-changing conditions of life on this globe during the geological periods of its formative cycle.”

Meditation thought: The passage relates changing forms to changing conditions. Let it prompt respect for interdependence, while keeping the cosmological account distinct from observations that require their own evidence.

6. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. II, p. 167.

“It is not in the course of natural law that man should become a perfect septenary being, before the seventh race in the seventh Round. Yet he has all these principles latent in him from his birth. Nor is it part of the evolutionary law that the Fifth principle (*Manas*), should receive its complete development before the Fifth Round. All such prematurely developed intellects (on the spiritual plane) in our Race are abnormal; they are those whom we call the ‘Fifth-Rounders.’ Even in the coming seventh Race, at the close of this Fourth Round, while our four lower principles will be fully developed, that of *Manas* will be only proportionately so.”

Meditation thought: Latent capacity and completed development are different conditions. Honour what remains possible without excusing present neglect, and choose one faculty that can be used more responsibly today.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Evolution and Karma”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 133.

“By the beginning of the Fourth Round, incipient humanity was essentially complete as an astral type, though as yet lacking in self-consciousness. During the Fourth Round, with each successive Race and Sub-Race, up until the beginning of the Fifth Race, there has been a progressive consolidation of the external form surrounding the astral double, the *linga sarira*. Corresponding to this process, and running parallel with it simultaneously, was a progressive adaptation of the physical form and structure of the fauna of the earth as the latter passed through its stages of geologic formation. Altogether, there was a tremendous consolidation of matter which produced a connection between the astral and the physical that has an important bearing on the porosity of the evolving brain to the Light of the *Atman*.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate the relation between an instrument and the consciousness acting through it. What ordinary habit would make your attention more available to a clear and compassionate purpose?

8. R.N. Iyer — “Involution”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 255.

“Beginning with the First Root Race of the present Fourth Round on this globe, the evolution of primitive humanity on the physical plane proceeded through the development of one of the seven senses in each of the successive Sub-Races. The separation of the senses characteristic of humanity in the Fifth Root Race represents a later and transitory stage of development which will eventually be resolved through a return to an earlier integrity of the faculties.”

Meditation thought: The image of separated senses points toward a more integrated understanding. Notice whether one kind of information has dominated your judgment and what another perspective might contribute.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Involution”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, pp. 255–256.

“This paradigmatic and dominant mode of cognition characterized the entire Third Root Race and extended into the early periods of the Fourth Root Race. The gradual differentiation and

subsequent fragmentation of spiritual perception into the present set of five senses all occurred during the present Fourth Round. This is of critical importance in comprehending the relationship between mental or self-conscious Manasic evolution and the development of the physical vestures. The full implications of these past periods in the present Round cannot be understood, however, until they are placed in the yet larger perspective of the overall balance between spirituality and mentality as affected by the cycling of the Rounds. Before the unfoldment of self-consciousness in the Fourth Round, the incipient humanity of the Third Round was characterized by a supernal and ethereal quality of vesture and form which pervaded the use of all the inner sense-organs in the Third Round."

Meditation thought: A wider cycle changes the significance of an isolated phase. Before judging a difficult period, ask what larger relationships would make your interpretation more patient, accurate and useful.

10. R.N. Iyer — "The Descent of Manas", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 165.

"Since the commencement of the Fourth Round all the lower kingdoms of Nature have vitally depended upon man for their continued development and collective evolution. The summoning of elementals into potent and creative combinations is the theurgic task of human benevolence, noetic deliberation and calm continuity of spiritual purpose. Individuals who come to understand this process will discover an ease and lightness in the pilgrimage of life that seem paradoxical to others who are burdened by a dour sense of duty. Sadly, those who are already weighted down by their own muddled misconceptions often aggravate this burden through compulsive speech, complaining about kindred souls and against life itself."

Meditation thought: Human power carries duties toward lives affected by it. Let benevolence become a practical inquiry into consequences, supported by sustained purpose and the skill needed to act helpfully.

11. R.N. Iyer — "Atma Vidya", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 68.

"Every human being, whether consciously or unconsciously, is performing the evolutionary task inherently necessary owing to the sevenfold constitution of man and the earth. For human beings in the Fourth Round, the aim is to become self-determining and self-conscious in relation to the evolutionary process. True self-consciousness cannot be awakened through any exterior means but only through establishing the true posture of inner devotion to the Guru. The Guru alone can kindle that inner light which can quicken in every human being the powers of higher self-consciousness. The degree of self-consciousness attained by any individual will be a product both of the intensity of devotion and the starting-point in any given life."

Meditation thought: The passage joins self-conscious growth to inward devotion. What highest principle can guide your effort, and how would greater fidelity to it change a responsibility already within reach?

12. R.N. Iyer — “Atma Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 69.

“In each succeeding Round, the degree of incarnation of the *Atman* and the corresponding degrees of human perfection and karmic responsibility increase. With the advent of the Fifth Round, human beings will be held fully responsible for their descents from sphere to sphere, and those who are unable to fulfil this responsibility will not be able to accomplish the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Rounds. Unable to fulfil the evolutionary programme, they will not be able to incarnate in future Rounds, and their shells will be incinerated by nature. Hence in the Fourth Round great courage is needed. Without it one is going to be afraid of the abyss, but there is no reason to be afraid because every human being is of a divine degree and can cooperate with the upward movement.”

Meditation thought: Read the call to courage through its assurance of a divine possibility in every person. Let the future invite responsible effort today, with compassion for fellow beings who are also learning.