

# Upadana

## Definitional Essay

### Theosophy Trust

*Upadana* means grasping, clinging, appropriation, or taking-hold. In the standard Twelve Links order, it is the ninth link. It follows *Tanha*, craving, and conditions *Bhava*, becoming. This placement is precise. Feeling gives rise to craving; craving, if not seen and restrained, hardens into grasping; grasping then becomes the material for a new state of becoming. *Upadana* is the point where desire says not only “I want,” but “this is mine,” “this is me,” or “this must continue.”

The term is subtle because grasping may look like love, loyalty, conviction, memory, care, protection, or spiritual aspiration. A person may cling to a body, a possession, a relationship, a role, a doctrine, a pain, a virtue, a reputation, or a cherished grievance. The object changes, but the structure is the same: consciousness takes hold of something and uses it to support a separative self. Craving thirsts; *Upadana* appropriates.

H.P. Blavatsky gives a powerful older formulation in *The Theosophical Glossary*. *Upâdâna* is the creative cause of *Bhava*, becoming, and this creative cause is “the clinging to life.” Though her enumeration differs from the standard order used in this series, the insight is exact. *Upadana* is creative because clinging makes future becoming. Whatever consciousness grasps becomes seed-material for the next movement of identity, action, habit, and birth.

The Glossary separately gives *Upadana* the philosophical meaning of material cause, illustrated by flax and linen. That usage is related but not interchangeable with Buddhist clinging. The weaving image can help us contemplate how appropriated experience supplies material for habitual identity. We should preserve the distinction: one definition concerns what a thing is made from; the other concerns the grasping that sustains conditioned becoming.

*Upadana* is therefore more intimate than possession. It is not only holding something in the hand. It is holding something in the sense of self. One may own very little and cling fiercely. One may have many responsibilities and not cling. The issue is appropriation. Does consciousness use what passes through it as material for self-expansion, self-defense, self-pity, self-display, or self-continuity?

Professor Iyer’s “Death and Immortality” gives the lived anatomy. Everything in *samsara* encourages the hold on life, possessions, bodily image, and name-and-form. In this hold lies the seed of separateness, violence, and falsehood. Falsehood, violence, and separateness are rooted

in fierce craving for personal existence. Clinging is not private; it shapes speech, action, society, and relationship.

When consciousness clings, it becomes afraid. It fears loss, insult, aging, contradiction, humiliation, and death. It may defend reputation more fiercely than truth, opinion more fiercely than wisdom, a wound more fiercely than healing, or a role more fiercely than service. *Upadana* makes the unreal seem necessary because the self has invested its continuity there.

Yet Professor Iyer also warns that aversion is itself a form of attachment. This is crucial. *Upadana* is not overcome by hating what one once grasped. Hatred still centers consciousness around the object. The person who says “I want nothing” may still cling to the image of being beyond wanting. Aversion is grasping in the mode of refusal.

The task is to loosen the hold of consciousness. One begins to see body, possessions, names, roles, and relationships as entrusted instruments rather than extensions of self. This is reverent non-ownership. One may care more truly when one no longer clings. One may love more freely when another being is not required to secure one’s identity.

In “Self-Magnetization,” Professor Iyer challenges the inward assumption of absolute ownership and describes everything as held in trust. This is an ethical and spiritual orientation, not a denial of ordinary responsibilities. The body, time, talent and access to teaching call for careful use. Gratitude changes the question from how an advantage can magnify the self to how what has been received may serve a wider life.

Gratitude loosens grasping because it recognizes gift. The grasping mind says, “mine.” The grateful mind says, “received.” The grasping mind says, “I must keep this.” The grateful mind asks, “How may this be used well?” This does not make life passive. It makes life more responsible. A trustee must be careful because what is entrusted belongs to a larger whole.

The yogic counterpart appears in the *kleshas*. Ignorance gives rise to egoism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to phenomenal existence. *Abhinivesha*, tenacious clinging to mundane existence, is self-sustaining through habit. Grasping is not a single act; it becomes a matrix. Repeated clinging deposits tendencies, and tendencies channel the mind into further clinging.

*Abhyasa* and *Vairagya* give the practical rhythm. *Abhyasa* is sustained practice; *Vairagya* is dispassionate detachment. Practice steadies the mind; detachment prevents the mind from appropriating its contents. Practice without detachment becomes self-improvement grasping. Detachment without practice becomes vague idealism. Together they loosen *Upadana*.

This discipline is needed even in spiritual life. One may cling to progress, purity, insight, teachers, methods, suffering, humility, or the identity of being a seeker. The object is refined, but

grasping remains. The path includes sacrifice of the fruit. Otherwise, the lower self has merely changed costume.

Love and grief need especially careful treatment. Sorrow after loss does not by itself prove possessiveness, and love cannot be commanded to recover on a spiritual timetable. The question of clinging arises where another person is required to preserve our identity or surrender their freedom. Letting that demand loosen may make love more generous, while leaving affection, sadness and the need for companionship fully human.

This is also true of doctrines. A teaching may be received as a lamp or grasped as a possession. When grasped, it becomes self-image: "I know," "I belong," "I am superior," "I am safe." Sacred language then becomes material cause for bondage. Truth does not become ours because we repeat it. We become more truthful when we are willing to be changed by it.

Consider a group entrusted with a room used by several communities. A member may speak of service while quietly treating the room as personal territory. New suggestions feel like trespass. Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception brings the actual users and purpose of the room back into view. Changing the arrangement may still require thoughtful discussion, but a proposal can be judged by its usefulness rather than by whose identity it confirms.

Human Solidarity is strengthened when stewardship includes those who possess less influence. Listening to an unfamiliar voice, sharing access and explaining a decision are small ways to prevent trusteeship from becoming ownership in disguise. The room remains cared for; responsibility becomes more exact. What changes is the inward demand that care confer a permanent right to control the whole field.

Professor Iyer's "Spiritual Perception" points toward the transmutation of desire. Can one develop such self-transcendence and such concern for the welfare of all souls that one's entire conception of desire is revolutionized? When desire is self-centered, it grasps. When desire is revolutionized by universal concern, it becomes creative compassion.

"The Pledge of Kwan-Yin" gives the compassionate culmination. When one recognizes the ubiquity of human suffering and chooses to make one's own suffering meaningful and creative for a larger purpose, the vow has self-correction built into it. Personal suffering is no longer appropriated as "my wound." It is offered into the service of all who suffer.

The image of the unclenched hand offers a patient ending. It may still carry a responsibility, protect a fragile thing, or hold another hand with affection. What relaxes is the claim that the thing held must secure the holder's entire existence. As experience is received without being made into a possession of the self, care becomes more attentive and less coercive. The study of *Upadana* then finds expression in gratitude, truthful relationship and useful stewardship.

## Glossary

**Abhinivesha** — Tenacious clinging to phenomenal existence; a klesha or affliction in Yoga psychology.

**Abhyasa** — Sustained practice; the repeated cultivation of steadiness and clarity.

**Absolute** — Unconditioned reality, beyond the limits and relations of manifested existence.

**Appropriation** — Taking an experience, role or object into the sense of mine or me; the inward claiming discussed under *Upadana*.

**Assiduous** — Persistent and careful; used of the sustained practice needed for discipline.

**Becoming** — Conditioned arising and continuation; *Bhava* is its particular use within dependent origination.

**Bhava** — Conditioned becoming or existence; the tenth link in dependent origination, between clinging and birth. Distinguish *Bhāva*, a related Sanskrit term for a state or disposition.

**Catenated** — Linked in a connected series; used of the causal relations among the *Nidanas*.

**Conditioned** — Dependent upon causes, circumstances, limits or relations; contrasted with the unconditioned.

**Dependent Origination** — The Buddhist teaching that conditioned existence and suffering arise through interdependent causes; the Twelve *Nidanas* give a standard twelvefold exposition.

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

**Dvesha** — Aversion; the movement away from what is regarded as painful.

**Hinayana** — A historical and contested designation for Buddhist teachings seeking liberation; spelled *Hīnayāna* in the quotation. Its appearance preserves the source's terminology.

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

**Jati** — Birth; the eleventh link in dependent origination. *Jāti* and *Jāti* are alternative spellings.

**Karma** — The law of ethical causation and adjustment; actions and motives bear consequences within a wider order.

**Kleshas** — Afflictions that obscure perception and sustain suffering in Yoga psychology.

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

**Manas** — The thinking principle in Theosophy; its higher spiritual individuality is distinguished from the personal ray. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

**Material cause** — That from which a thing is made, as flax is the material from which linen is produced.

**Namarupa** — Name-and-form; mental and bodily factors in dependent origination, and the named personality in Theosophical exposition. *Nāmarūpa* and *Nâmarûpa* are alternate spellings.

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

**Phenomenal** — Pertaining to appearances and conditioned experience, as distinguished from an ultimate or underlying reality.

**Raga** — Attachment or attraction toward what is taken to be pleasurable.

**Samsara** — Conditioned cyclic existence; the field of birth and death sustained by ignorance and craving.

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

**Trusteeship** — Caring for what has been received in view of a wider purpose, rather than treating it as an absolute possession of the self.

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

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

**Vairagya** — Dispassionate detachment; freedom from domination by attractions and aversions, supporting steady practice.

## Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, “Nidâna”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 232.

“*Upâdâna*, the creative cause of *Bhava* which thus becomes the cause of *Jâti* which is the effect; and this creative cause is the clinging to life.”

*Meditation thought*: Clinging is named as a condition of becoming. The study asks how an inward claim of possession supplies momentum to later thought and action.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, “Upâdâna”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 356.

“Upâdâna (Sk.). Material Cause; as flax is the cause of linen.”

*Meditation thought:* Material cause is a distinct philosophical use of *Upadana*. The flax and linen image can illuminate an analogy, while remaining different from the Buddhist definition of clinging.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 39.

“The twelve *Nidanas* or causes of being. Each is the effect of its antecedent cause, and a cause, in its turn, to its successor ; the sum total of the *Nidanas* being based on the four truths, a doctrine especially characteristic of the *Hînayâna* System. They belong to the theory of the stream of catenated law which produces merit and demerit, and finally brings Karma into full sway.”

*Meditation thought:* A condition is also an effect of earlier conditions. This larger view helps self-correction remain patient without treating a habit as unchangeable.

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

“Everything in this world of *samsara* is a conspiracy to encourage this hold on life, this hold on possessions, this hold onto the image that men form of the body, their identification with their own name and form, their *namarupa*.”

*Meditation thought:* Professor Iyer describes the many supports given to possessive identity. Observe which familiar support seems indispensable to one’s sense of being secure.

5. 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.”

*Meditation thought:* Fierce personal craving can make another person’s freedom seem threatening. The passage asks us to examine that mechanism in ourselves before explaining it in others.

6. 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.”

*Meditation thought:* Aversion may continue an attachment under another form. The work is to loosen the hold, not simply to hate what once seemed necessary.

7. R.N. Iyer, “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 277.

“Attachment (*raga*) is the pursuit of what is mistaken to be pleasurable, whilst aversion (*dvesha*) flees from what is believed to be painful.”

*Meditation thought:* Attraction and aversion organize pursuit and avoidance. Distinguishing them from careful judgment allows a decision to be guided by more than immediate preference.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Sadhana Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 277.

"Clinging to phenomenal existence (*abhinivesha*) is the logical outcome of the operation of ignorance, and once aroused is self-sustaining through the inertia of habit."

*Meditation thought:* Habit gives clinging a persistence beyond one decision. Repeated recollection and practical changes in conduct can supply different conditions.

9. R.N. Iyer, "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 271.

"Patanjali taught that deliverance can only come through *abhyasa*, assiduous practice, and *vairagya*, dispassionate detachment."

*Meditation thought:* Practice and detachment support one another. Steadiness needs a purpose beyond displaying improvement or securing a spiritual identity.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Self-Magnetization", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 186.

"It is an abnormal notion in human evolution that one owns anything at all. Not only is everything held in trust, but one is a Manasically individuated being chiefly for the sake of expressing gratitude."

*Meditation thought:* Trusteeship changes the inward meaning of having. What has been received can be used carefully without being treated as an absolute possession of the self.

11. 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:* The question redirects desire toward the welfare of souls. Relationship becomes more generous when another being is no longer required to secure one's identity.

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:* A larger purpose can keep a vow open to correction. The significance is freely chosen service, not an obligation to turn every wound immediately into a lesson.