

Vasana

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

An inclination can shape our perception before we recognize that it is present. We notice the slight and overlook the kindness, feel a hunger for praise before any work is offered, or read uncertainty as a threat. *Vasana* helps us inquire into such hidden influence. In Professor Iyer's "Kaivalya Pada," the term concerns the force of craving and the unchecked impulse toward life in form. Particular *vasanas* are traces of unfulfilled longing whose effects remain latent until suitable conditions bring them into expression.

A helpful image is a tint in the lens of cognition. A tint changes the whole appearance of what is seen, yet the observer may attribute the change entirely to the object. Professor Iyer uses this image to distinguish subtle residues from the more recognizable modifications associated with a specific desire. We may know that we want a particular object while remaining unaware of the deeper expectation of fulfillment through possession. The latter can persist as the objects of wanting change.

Samskara and *vasana* belong to this common inquiry into conditioning, but their uses should remain distinguishable. *Samskara* emphasizes an impression or formative residue left by experience. *Vasana*, in the source passages considered here, emphasizes craving and the latent traces of longing. A *chittavritti* is an actual movement of the mental field. These are useful distinctions of emphasis rather than a universal classification to impose on every Hindu or Buddhist text. The source and context determine the precise meaning of each term.

A tendency's latency does not establish its extinction. Professor Iyer describes *vasanas* as appearing when conditions are ripe, sometimes with a force that seems surprising in relation to the present personality. The teaching places this persistence within a continuity extending across incarnations and not dependent upon brain-memory. It does not invite us to invent a former life to explain an impulse. Its immediate value is to deepen patience and attentiveness toward the tendency that can actually be observed now.

The distinction between latent cause and manifest effect also protects against a hurried interpretation of spiritual progress. A clearer orientation does not instantly dissolve every consequence of earlier desire. In the account of the *yogin*, past karma can continue to unfold even when fresh binding karma is no longer generated. The student should be still more cautious about claiming completion. The return of a difficulty calls for discernment about its present operation, without either despair or the convenient declaration that it belongs only to the past.

Professor Iyer distinguishes particular *vasanas*, which have specific histories, from *vasana* as desire in general, described as coeval with mind and cosmos. The broader statement places craving within differentiated manifestation. It should not be turned into a claim that the Absolute desires, or that every individual impulse is eternal and unalterable. A universal possibility and a particular conditioned expression are different matters. The distinction opens the metaphysical horizon while preserving the meaningfulness of deliberate spiritual effort.

The mutable mind, *chitta*, supports *vasana* through its changing relation to objects. In the yogic account, freedom requires a mind wholly awake and steadfast, capable of reflecting *purusha* without distortion. This goes beyond temporarily avoiding an attractive object. An opportunity may be absent while its imagined promise remains intact. The deeper work concerns the way satisfaction is sought and the identity that depends upon obtaining it. Withdrawal can create useful conditions for inquiry, but it cannot substitute for the inquiry itself.

The Voice of the Silence gives a severe warning against the belief that desire is extinguished by feeding it. Repetition may instead enlarge its claim. The passage belongs to a discipline of spiritual renunciation and should be read with that purpose in view. It does not counsel hatred of life or indiscriminate rejection of memory. It asks the aspirant to stop renewing the inward fascination that binds attention to what has already been relinquished in intention.

Consider the recurring wish to acquire something new whenever a day feels empty. The item may be useful, but the promise surrounding it deserves attention. Perhaps the purchase is imagined to confer a more satisfying identity, while things already possessed quickly lose their power to delight. Rather than condemning the impulse or automatically obeying it, we can examine the expectation. What would the object actually do, and what inward condition have we asked it to create? The distinction allows an ordinary practical choice to become more conscious.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception includes the resources involved, the responsibilities already accepted, and the lives affected by our use of things. We may decide that the purchase is appropriate, or recognize that another use of our time and means would serve better. The wider inquiry does not make every pleasure suspect. It loosens the presumption that a private feeling of lack must determine the whole decision. Attention becomes available to relationships and obligations that craving had pushed to the edge.

Human Solidarity enters through this changed use of attention. A hidden hunger for validation can make other people into suppliers of reassurance; persistent mistrust can make them answer for injuries they did not cause. We cannot assume that every difficult response has this origin, but we can examine our own recurring expectations. As the coloring becomes more visible, we

gain the possibility of meeting a person with greater fairness. Others are given more room to be understood in their actual circumstances.

The *yamas* and *niyamas* give self-study an ethical foundation. Harmlessness restrains the impulse to discharge discomfort upon another. Truthfulness asks that we stop supplying flattering explanations for our motives. Non-appropriation and non-possession challenge the demand to secure ourselves through taking and keeping. These observances are not merely preliminary rules to discard after acquiring insight. Professor Iyer presents them as a continuing moral discipline through which the entire relation to the world can be transformed.

Vairagya supports the process through a lucid reappraisal of expectations, memories, and habits. Professor Iyer carefully distinguishes it from apathy or disgust, which may conceal continued captivity to pleasure and pain. Detachment leaves us capable of care. It allows a tendency to be recognized without being made a command, and it permits useful action without an added demand for personal satisfaction. Joined to sustained meditation, this discipline addresses the conditions through which craving repeatedly gains influence.

Nishkama karma describes the advanced ideal of action free from personal desire for its fruits. The *yogin's* exactness continues, while separative appropriation falls away. For an ordinary student, the teaching supplies a measure rather than a status to claim. We can ask whether the work receives our full attention and whether its benefit matters when no one notices our contribution. Such questions help reveal the coloring of motive without pretending that every hidden trace has already been removed.

The lens becomes clearer through a long fidelity to seeing and acting truthfully. A latent tendency may emerge; it can be studied, restrained where needed, and brought into relation with a wider purpose. Its appearance need not become a verdict on the whole person. Nor must it be welcomed as destiny. There is work to do with what has appeared. In that work, patience becomes active, the mind gains room to discern, and care becomes less dependent on satisfying an unseen demand.

Glossary

Ahimsa — Harmlessness or nonviolence in thought, speech, and action.

Aparigraha — Non-possession or non-grasping; one of the yogic restraints.

Asteya — Non-stealing or freedom from appropriation; one of the yogic restraints.

Avidya — Fundamental ignorance or mistaken identification, from which the other afflictions arise.

- Brahmacharya** — Contenance and disciplined conservation of energy in thought and conduct.
- Buddhi** — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.
- Chitta** — The mind-field, whose modifications are examined in Patanjali's yoga.
- Chittavritti** — A modification or movement of the mind-field; *chittavrittis* is the plural.
- Guna** — A quality or constituent of *Prakriti*; the three are *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.
- Kaivalya** — Emancipation or spiritual freedom; in Patanjali, the Seer's release from mistaken identification.
- Karana Sarira** — The causal body; the cited glossary distinguishes its exoteric association with *avidya* from its esoteric spiritual meaning.
- Karanopadhi** — The causal basis or vehicle; in the cited glossary, associated with *Buddhi* and higher *Manas*.
- Mahavrata** — The Great Vow; the universal commitment expressed by the yogic restraints.
- Manas** — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice.
- Mara** — The tempter or personification of obstacles and illusion in Buddhist and Theosophical symbolism.
- Nishkama** — Desireless; acting without personal craving for the result.
- Niyama** — A positive yogic observance; *niyamas* is the plural.
- Prakriti** — Nature or the field of manifestation, distinguished from *Purusha* in Patanjali's yoga.
- Pranayama** — The regulation of breath and life-energy within the integrated discipline of yoga.
- Purusha** — The Seer or spiritual consciousness, distinguished from the changing field of *Prakriti*.
- Qua** — Latin for as or in the capacity of; used in the source to emphasize *Purusha* as *Purusha*.
- Raja** — King or ruler; used in *Raja* Yoga and in the symbolic phrase *Rajah* of the senses.
- Samskara** — An impression or tendency formed through experience; *samskaras* is the plural.
- Sattva** — Lucidity, harmony, or balance; one of the three *gunas*.
- Satya** — Truth or truthfulness; one of the yogic restraints.
- Sutratman** — The thread-soul; the principle of continuity through successive lives.
- Tamas** — Inertia, obscuration, or resistance; one of the three *gunas*.

Taraka Raja Yoga — The integral yoga discussed in Professor Iyer's exposition of Patanjali.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Vasana — Latent craving or a trace of unfulfilled longing; *vasanas* are particular tendencies awaiting conditions for expression.

Yama — Ethical restraint in yoga; also the divine figure associated with death and the teaching of immortality.

Yogin — A practitioner of yoga; *yogins* and *yogi* are related forms.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 295.

“The *yogin* is above good and evil acts, not because he has become indifferent to the consequences of action, but rather because he is naturally disposed to remove all obstructions and mental deposits. Good conduct as well as bad bears fruit for the doer, but the *yogin* acts in such complete accord with Nature that what he does responds to necessity, being neither pure (*sattva*) nor polluted (*tamās*) nor mixed, like that of most human beings. His conduct follows a fourth course, that of *nishkama* or desirelessness, so that he cannot be said to do what he wishes, but rather he only does what needs to be done. *Nishkama* karma, the fruition of pure desireless action, neither returns nor clings to the *yogin*. Being one with Nature, he ceases to be a separative centre of focus or agency, and his actions, strictly speaking, are no longer ‘his’, being the spontaneous play of *prakriti* before *purusha*. Hence, he leaves no impressions or residues in his consciousness even whilst doing his duty with single-minded precision, since he acts as the willing instrument of *purusha* immanent in *prakriti*. He has only former mental deposits, resulting from past karma, which he meticulously removes to attain total freedom.”

Meditation thought: Read desireless action as a culmination of discipline. It preserves exact responsibility while releasing the claim that binds the doer to the act.

2. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, pp. 295–296.

“The *yogin*'s assiduously nurtured capacities disallow the emergence of fresh karma, the results of which could adhere to him because he is no longer subject to *vasana*, the force of craving and the unchecked impulse for life in form, with its attendant consequences. But he cannot instantly dissolve karma generated long ago, for whatever was the result of *vasana* in the past must inevitably linger, although the *yogin* is aware of its antecedents and does not become distracted or discouraged by it. In addition to the results that are already manifest, the force of craving and the *vasanas* (identifiable traces of unfulfilled longings and the cumulative karma they rapidly engender) deposit unconscious residues in the mind. These are more difficult to discern, for they are not recurring modifications of consciousness such as those

induced by specific objects of desire, but are subtle tinctures or discolorations in the lens of cognition, hard to detect, recognize and remove. Being unconscious, and unknown to the thinker, they will appear only when conditions are ripe, and the *yogin* must patiently wait for their emergence in order to eliminate them. Even though immense periods of time and many incarnations may intervene between the initial insertion of the *vasanas* into consciousness and their eventual emergence, they are neither dissolved nor transformed, for they are retained in a stream of soul reminiscence which is not brain-dependent, and which indeed provides a basis of continuity. This stream of latent reminiscence is revealed in the sometimes sudden appearance of surprising tendencies that seem out of character, but are nonetheless inescapable in the strict operation of karma.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish a new direction from the instant disappearance of old consequences. Latent tendencies call for alertness when conditions reveal them.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 296.

“Although any specific *vasana* could, in principle, be traced to a particular point in time – some previous incarnation – when the stream of consciousness encountered a similar cluster of thoughts, feelings or acts, *vasana* or desire in general is atemporal. It is coeval with mind (*chitta*) and with the cosmos. Whilst any distinct *vasana* could first appear only when a congenial psycho-physical structure arose to make its manifestation possible, *vasana* as a force is an inextricable element in the matrices of differentiated matter. Just because the propensity to enjoyment or self-indulgence is an integral aspect of the cosmic process – the captivating dance of *prakriti* before *purusha* – the overcoming of all such propensities demands a deliberate choice maintained over time through *Taraka Raja Yoga*, the discipline of transcendental detachment. *Vasana* finds its support in the mutable mind, which is the action of *prakriti* owing to the proximity of *purusha*. Only when the mind is fully awake, wholly focussed and serenely steadfast will *vasana* vanish. This is equivalent to the potential ability of *prakriti* to behold *purusha qua purusha* without wavering, and this is only possible as a deliberate act – *buddhi* reflecting *purusha* without distortion or fluctuation.”

Meditation thought: Keep a particular tendency distinct from the wider force of desire. Its present expression can be studied without inventing a history for it.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 296.

“Considered from the temporal standpoint, the protracted continuity of *vasana* as a strong force and the specific *vasanas* as persisting matrices of memory suggest the arbitrariness of the divisions of time into past, present and future. Each *vasana* is but a seed which inevitably grows into a plant and bears appropriate fruit: knowing the seed, one can cognize all future states of development. In the present lie latent the past and the future, just as the present was contained in the future and will remain until it slides speedily into the past. The underlying reality cannot be understood without seeing the present as no more than a moving phase

through the limitless continuum of time, all of which is latent save for the swiftly passing moment. When all the *vasanas* have been consigned to the past, and when even the very basis of desire ceases to bother consciousness, *kaivalya* alone abides. All continuous change and the ramifying consequences of change are the tumultuous activity of the *gunas*, and when that relentless activity belongs to the past, no longer swaying the mind of the *yogin*, the *gunas* have ceased their incessant interplay in the stream of consciousness. Becoming latent, they have ceased to manifest and have become dormant or homogeneous, leaving intact the luminous vision of serene self-emancipation (*kaivalya*)."

Meditation thought: Contemplate the seed as a relation between cause and unfolding effect. Present choices participate in that continuity and deserve careful attention.

5. R.N. Iyer — "Patanjali's Taraka Raja Yoga", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 267.

"This relaxed disinterestedness, *vairagya*, has nothing to do with passive indifference, positive disgust, inert apathy or feeble-minded ennui as often experienced in the midst of desperation and tension in daily affairs. Those are really the self-protective responses of one who is captive to the pleasure-pain principle and is deeply vulnerable to the flux of events and the vicissitudes of fortune. *Vairagya* implies a conscious transcendence of the pleasure-pain principle through a radical reappraisal of expectations, memories and habits. The pleasure-pain principle, dependent upon passivity, ignorance and servility for its operation, is replaced by a reality principle rooted in an active, noetic apprehension of psychospiritual causation. Only when this impersonal perspective is gained can the *yogin* safely begin to alter significantly his psycho-physical nature through breath control, *pranayama*, and other exercises."

Meditation thought: Let detachment free perception from compulsive attraction and recoil. Apathy would leave the deeper coloring unexamined.

6. R.N. Iyer — "Sadhana Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, pp. 280–281.

"The *yamas* or restraints are five, constituting a firm ethical foundation for spiritual growth, starting with *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and including *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (continence) and *aparigraha* (non-possession). Shankaracharya held that *ahimsa* – non-violence, harmlessness, defencelessness in Shelley's phrase – is the most important of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, and is the root of restraint. Like all constraints and observances, *ahimsa* must not be interpreted narrowly but should be seen in its widest sense. For Shankaracharya, this meant that *ahimsa* should be practised in body, speech and mind so that one avoids harming others in any way, even through an unkind thought."

Meditation thought: Give restraint an inclusive meaning. A hidden impulse should be considered before it becomes harm in thought, speech, or action.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 281.

“For Patanjali, however, *ahimsa* and the other *yamas* and *niyamas* constitute the daily moral discipline needed to pursue *Taraka Raja Yoga*. *Taraka Raja Yoga* is not a narrowly technical or specialized practice to be added to other instrumental activities in the world; it is rather the indispensable means for radically transforming one’s essential perception of, and therefore one’s entire relation to, the world. From the standpoint of Self-knowledge, which is ultimate gnosis, there are no greater disciplines. Hence the *yamas* are not altered by condition and circumstance, social class or nationality, nor by time nor the actual level of spiritual attainment. Together they constitute the awesome *mahavrata* or Great Vow, the first crucial step to true spiritual freedom.”

Meditation thought: Allow ethical practice to shape the whole relation to the world. It remains necessary while the mind’s subtler tendencies are being studied.

8. R.N. Iyer — “The Light of the Logos”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 49.

“Though all the languages of the world are largely misleading, one can still find, hidden amidst the ignorantly transmitted words and sounds of shadowy beings, pale reflections of the noumenal realm of reality. Awareness of this realm, even when one is still largely captive to a shadowy and derivative sense of being, can be of immense benefit to one who really starts to withdraw inwards and increase spiritual wakefulness. Paradoxically, one has both to withdraw from what looks like activity and at the same time, instead of becoming drowsy, one has to become much more wakeful. Many people have great difficulty in doing this, because they have become so dependent for a sense of being alive upon hectic involvement in the phenomenal world of visible effects. Through engendered habits, the centres of action have become so clogged with disordered elementals associated with the sense-organs that they merely fall asleep when they try to withdraw inwards. The only recourse is to generate a profound state of wakefulness from as high a level as possible, and then decisively burn out the matrices and patterns through which the lethargy of non-learning has become consolidated.”

Meditation thought: Distinguish inward withdrawal from drowsiness. The passage asks for a wakefulness capable of meeting established patterns.

9. R.N. Iyer — “The Gupta Vidya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 9.

“Memory is integral to consciousness and since all matter is alive and conscious, all beings from cells to deities have memory of some type. In man, memory is generally divided into four categories: physical memory, remembrance, recollection and reminiscence. In remembrance, an idea impinges upon the mind from the past by free association; in recollection, the mind deliberately searches it out. Reminiscence, however, is of another order altogether. Called ‘soul-memory’, it links every human being to previous lives and assures each that he or she will live again. In principle, any man or woman may recover the knowledge gained in

previous incarnations and maintain continuity with the *sutratman*, the thread-soul, the eternal witness to every incarnation.”

Meditation thought: Keep soul-memory distinct from ordinary brain recollection. Let the doctrine encourage patience without turning imagination into claimed personal history.

10. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 13.

“Long and weary is the way before thee, O Disciple. One single thought about the past that thou hast left behind, will drag thee down and thou wilt have to start the climb anew. Kill in thyself all memory of past experiences. Look not behind or thou art lost. Do not believe that lust can ever be killed out if gratified or satiated, for this is an abomination inspired by *Mara*. It is by feeding vice that it expands and waxes strong, like to the worm that fattens on the blossom’s heart.”

Meditation thought: Recognize the reinforcing effect of gratification. Read the renunciatory counsel in its spiritual context, without turning it into hostility toward life.

11. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Voice of the Silence*, Fragment I, p. 6.

“If thou would’st cross the second safely, stop not the fragrance of its stupefying blossoms to inhale. If freed thou would’st be from the karmic chains, seek not for thy Guru in those Mayavic regions. The WISE ONES tarry not in pleasure-grounds of senses. The WISE ONES heed not the sweet-tongued voices of illusion. Seek for him who is to give thee birth, in the Hall of Wisdom, the Hall which lies beyond, wherein all shadows are unknown, and where the light of truth shines with unfading glory.”

Meditation thought: Test an attractive inward promise against the purpose of the path. Receptivity needs discernment if it is to remain free from fascination.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “*Kârana Sarîra*”, p. 176.

“*Kârana Sarîra* (Sk.). The ‘Causal body’. It is dual in its meaning. Exoterically, it is *Avidya*, ignorance, or that which is the cause of the evolution of a human ego and its reincarnation; hence the lower *Manas* esoterically—the causal body or *Kâranopadhi* stands in the *Taraka Raja yoga* as corresponding to *Buddhi* and the Higher ‘*Manas*,’ or Spiritual Soul.”

Meditation thought: Preserve the distinction between the two meanings of the causal body. A supporting correspondence should not become an equation between every spiritual principle and craving.