

Vijnana

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Vijnana means consciousness or discriminative knowing, but its meaning depends upon the teaching in which it appears. In Buddhist dependent origination, the corresponding Pali term *Vinnana* designates conditioned consciousness, the third of twelve links. In Professor Iyer's "Kalki Maitreya," *vijnana* signifies philosophic insight rooted in meditation. These uses are related through the activity of knowing, yet they must be distinguished from the beginning: a moment of seeing or thinking is not, simply by occurring, spiritual wisdom.

In the Buddhist *skandha* teaching cited by H.P. Blavatsky, *Vinnana* is one of the five attributes through which personal experience is described. Her English presentation calls it mental powers. Form, sensation, perception, mental tendencies and consciousness are distinguishable aspects of that experience. Consciousness here is the knowing of an object; interpretation, memory and intention involve other factors as well. Calling the whole complex *Vijnana* would erase distinctions the analysis is intended to make. The knowing is conditioned, and is not an independent, unchanging Self.

Yet H.P. Blavatsky's treatment of the *skandhas* also prevents materialism. The *skandhas* perish like a flower, leaving behind a perfume, but their effects are not meaningless. The reincarnating Ego is not identical with the passing personality, yet something of each personality leaves its impress upon the permanent Self. Thus *Vijnana*, as conditioned consciousness, is impermanent, but the use made of consciousness has consequences.

As the third link in the Twelve *Nidanas*, *Viññāṇa* arises from *Sankhara*, formative karma or volitional formations, and conditions *Namarupa*, name-and-form. Consciousness does not appear in isolation. It is conditioned by prior formations and karmic constructions. It then enters into the naming and forming process through which a world and a self become mutually structured. In this sense, *Viññāṇa* is not pure witness-consciousness. It is consciousness already bearing a tendency and already moving under causes.

The Theosophical account of reincarnation introduces a further distinction. Blavatsky differentiates the passing personality from the enduring individuality that assimilates its spiritual experience. This is her metaphysical interpretation of continuity; it should not be silently read into the Buddhist definition of consciousness. The traditions can illuminate one another without their different accounts of selfhood being made identical. Care with those differences gives the student firmer ground for contemplation.

The Secret Doctrine gives the wider metaphysical background. H.P. Blavatsky teaches that pre-Cosmic Ideation is the root of all individual consciousness, while pre-Cosmic Substance provides the vehicles in which consciousness can become individualized and reflective. Personal consciousness is therefore a limited expression of a universal source. It is not ultimate merely because it is consciousness. Consciousness can be narrowed, distorted, fragmented, and appropriated by personality.

Professor Iyer's *Gupta Vidya* usage opens the higher possibility. He writes of courageous individuals gaining the clarity of philosophic insight, *vijnana*, rooted in deep meditation, *dhyana*. Here *vijnana* is no longer merely the mental-power *skandha* moving through conditioned patterns. It is clarified insight. It is consciousness made transparent enough to reconnect with the primordial vibration of the Mysteries.

A useful practical connection can nevertheless be drawn. Conditioned knowing may be studied, its assumptions questioned, and its habitual alliance with self-interest loosened. In Theosophical psychology this work helps *Manas* become receptive to *Buddhi*. That is a comparison between teachings, rather than a claim that every Buddhist use of *Vinnana* names a lower stage of Professor Iyer's philosophic insight. The shared concern is the education of awareness; the terms retain the meanings their respective contexts establish.

This is where *Manas* becomes central. The human mind can fall downward into personality or rise toward *Buddhi*. *Vijnana* as mental power may serve either movement. It can be clever in the service of desire, or lucid in the service of truth. It can rationalize craving, or examine it. It can defend separateness, or discover interdependence.

The Voice of the Silence gives a helpful image: mind is like a mirror gathering dust while it reflects. *Vijnana* reflects, but its reflection may be dusty. The dust is accumulated impression, desire, fear, habit, and self-reference. The mirror need not be broken; it must be cleansed by Soul-Wisdom. Meditation, humility, devotion, and ethical self-correction clarify the reflecting instrument.

In daily life, consciousness is not neutral. It hears through memory and sees through expectation. One person hears correction and experiences humiliation; another receives instruction. One person sees beauty and grasps; another sees beauty and gives thanks. The object alone does not explain the response. *Vijnana* is already conditioned.

Consider receiving a brief message from a friend: "We need to talk." The words are few, but consciousness quickly presents a world in which something has gone wrong. Memory supplies an old quarrel; imagination adds an accusation. Before replying, one can distinguish the actual message from the story now attached to it. Asking what the friend wishes to discuss may reveal

a request for help. The initial awareness was real as an experience, but the conclusion it seemed to guarantee was mistaken.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception begins here by restoring omitted possibilities. The friend has a life beyond our remembered disagreement. Our present anxiety is one condition of the encounter, not the measure of its entire meaning. Such examination does not require doubting every perception. It requires proportion: attending to evidence, recognizing uncertainty, and allowing another being to appear beyond the image we have supplied.

Remembering this makes us more cautious about explaining other people. A guarded response may arise from fear, exhaustion, experience or circumstances we have not discovered. We cannot diagnose the whole person from one reaction. Awareness of our own conditioning gives us a reason to ask, listen and revise an interpretation. Compassion becomes more accurate when it leaves room for what we do not yet know.

This deepens Human Solidarity. We all live in worlds partly made by consciousness. Universal Brotherhood is not only affection; it is a discipline of perception. To see another truly requires loosening the projections through which one's own consciousness distorts the other. To serve wisely requires asking not only what is happening outside, but what kind of consciousness is meeting the event.

Attention also has a shared setting. A household can encourage honest questions or punish them; a meeting can make uncertainty speakable or reward bluffing. These conditions influence how people perceive and respond. The study of consciousness therefore includes responsibility for the atmosphere we help create, without assuming that one person can control another's inward life.

The higher form of *Vijnana* is not mere analysis. It is insight inseparable from responsibility. Professor Iyer's phrase "philosophic insight rooted in deep meditation" protects the student from both intellectualism and vagueness. Insight must be exact and universal, but also inwardly tested, quieted, and freed from restless self-assertion.

The mirror image also asks for patience. An instrument clouded over many years is not clarified by one successful observation. Returning to inquiry after an error is itself part of the work, especially when the error has affected someone else.

Vijnana teaches hope without self-flattery. Consciousness is conditioned, but it can know its conditioning. It is clouded, but it can be clarified. It is impressed by karma, but it can introduce new causes. It is entangled in name-and-form, but it can recognize the entanglement. When *Manas* turns toward *Buddhi*, when knowledge becomes humility, and when attention becomes

service, consciousness ceases to be merely a link in bondage and begins to become a path of awakening.

Glossary

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

Atman — The universal Self or spiritual principle; also written *Atma*.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman* in Theosophy, associated with intuitive discernment and the illumination of *Manas*.

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.

Cosmic Ideation — The universal aspect of intelligence or thought from which individual consciousness is derived in *The Secret Doctrine*.

Cosmic Substance — The universal ground of the vehicles through which consciousness becomes differentiated in manifestation.

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

Deus ex machina — Latin for a god from the machine; Olcott uses the theatrical expression figuratively for karma operating through successive personalities.

Devachan — The post-mortem state of rest and spiritual assimilation described in Theosophy.

Dhyana — Meditation or contemplative absorption; Professor Iyer relates philosophic insight to its depth.

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

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

Evanescent — Passing quickly; transient rather than permanent.

Fohat — The dynamic link between cosmic intelligence and substance in *The Secret Doctrine*.

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

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.

Ideation — The activity or principle of thought; in cosmic contexts, universal intelligence rather than a private mental image.

Individuality — The enduring spiritual Ego in the Theosophical account, distinguished from its successive personalities.

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

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

Monad — The spiritual unity or pilgrim principle in Theosophy; the sources distinguish its higher nature from a temporary personality.

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

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

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

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

Pre-cosmic — Prior to differentiated cosmic manifestation in the metaphysical exposition of *The Secret Doctrine*.

Primordial — Pertaining to an original or underlying condition before later differentiation.

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

Rupa — Form or material embodiment; one of the *skandhas* and the form aspect of *Namarupa*.

Samkhara — The spelling used in the Key's list of the *skandhas* for mental tendencies; related to *Sankhara* and *Samskara*.

Samskara — A formation, impression or tendency; its exact function depends on context. *Samskaras* is the plural.

Sankhara — Pali for formations, especially volitional formations in dependent origination; related to Sanskrit *Samskara*.

Sanna — Pali for perception or recognition; rendered abstract ideas in the historical passage quoted in *The Key to Theosophy*.

Skandhas — The aggregates or changing factors of personal experience. *Skandha* is the singular; historical Theosophical translations of the factors differ from current Buddhist terminology.

Substratum — An underlying basis; used in *The Secret Doctrine* for pre-cosmic substance in relation to differentiated matter.

Tanhaically — Through the action of craving or thirst; used by Olcott of the coherence of successive personal aggregates.

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

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

Vestures — The bodies or instruments through which consciousness is expressed at different levels in Theosophical teaching.

Vijnana — Sanskrit for consciousness or discriminative knowing; Professor Iyer also uses it for philosophic insight. Its meaning must be established by context.

Vinnana — Pali for consciousness, the third link and one of the five aggregates; *Viññāṇa* is the diacritic form. The Key's historical translation gives mental powers.

Volitional — Involving intention or the exercise of will.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 73.

“There are five *Skandhas* or attributes in the Buddhist teachings: ‘*Rupa* (form or body), material qualities; *Vedana*, sensation; *Sanna*, abstract ideas; *Samkhara*, tendencies of mind; *Vinnana*, mental powers. Of these we are formed; by them we are conscious of existence; and through them communicate with the world about us.’”

Meditation thought: The fivefold analysis gives consciousness a place among the conditions of personal experience. Distinguish the knowing of an object from the feelings and interpretations accompanying it.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 74.

“This proves to you that while the undying qualities of the personality — such as love, goodness, charity, etc. — attach themselves to the immortal Ego, photographing on it, so to speak, a permanent image of the divine aspect of the man who was, his material *Skandhas* (those which generate the most marked Karmic effects) are as evanescent as a flash of lightning.”

Meditation thought: Theosophical continuity concerns the spiritual value of a life, not the permanence of every passing impression. Consider what an ordinary response contributes beyond its immediate effect.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 73.

“The EGO which re-incarnates, the individual and immortal — not personal — ‘I’; the vehicle, in short, of the Atma-Buddhic MONAD, that which is rewarded in *Devachan* and punished on earth, and that, finally, to which the reflection only of the *Skandhas*, or attributes, of every incarnation attaches itself.”

Meditation thought: Blavatsky distinguishes the reincarnating individuality from its temporary attributes. Let this metaphysical distinction remain clear without importing it unexamined into every Buddhist use of consciousness.

4. H.S. Olcott, *Buddhist Catechism*, quoted in H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 76.

“The successive appearances upon the earth, or ‘descents into generation,’ of the tanhaically coherent parts (*Skandhas*) of a certain being, are a succession of personalities. In each birth the PERSONALITY differs from that of a previous or next succeeding birth. Karma, the *DEUS EX MACHINA*, masks (or shall we say reflects?) itself now in the personality of a sage, again as an artisan, and so on throughout the string of births. But though personalities ever shift, the one line of life along which they are strung, like beads, runs unbroken; it is ever that particular line, never any other.”

Meditation thought: Olcott’s thread and beads illustrate continuity amid changing personalities. The passage is his formulation, quoted by Blavatsky; its image should invite inquiry rather than conceal differences between traditions.

5. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 15.

“Just as pre-Cosmic Ideation is the root of all individual consciousness, so pre-Cosmic Substance is the substratum of matter in the various grades of its differentiation. Hence it will be apparent that the contrast of these two aspects of the Absolute is essential to the existence of the ‘Manifested Universe.’”

Meditation thought: Consciousness and its vehicles are placed within a universal metaphysical relation. The experience of being aware does not make one's present instrument of awareness unlimited.

6. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 16.

"Thus from Spirit, or Cosmic Ideation, comes our consciousness; from Cosmic Substance the several vehicles in which that consciousness is individualised and attains to self—or reflective—consciousness; while *Fohat*, in its various manifestations, is the mysterious link between Mind and Matter, the animating principle electrifying every atom into life."

Meditation thought: The relation of mind and matter is presented through *Fohat*. Reflect on how consciousness requires expression through conditions, even while its ultimate ground exceeds any one expression.

7. 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: Each condition is both consequence and occasion for further consequence. The causal setting of consciousness leaves room for responsibility rather than merely the repetition of inherited tendencies.

8. R.N. Iyer, "Kalki Maitreya", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 433.

"Now, more than ever before, as courageous individuals gain the clarity of philosophic insight (*vijnana*), rooted in deep meditation (*dhyana*), they can reconnect themselves with the primordial vibration of the Mysteries, 'the eternal thought in the eternal mind', the authentic source of the abundant creative potentials in themselves and in all Humanity."

Meditation thought: Here *Vijnana* names philosophic insight rooted in meditation. Its higher use is explicit; it must not be confused with the mere occurrence of sensory or mental awareness.

9. R.N. Iyer, "Spiritual Wakefulness", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 220.

"All negations of false continuity of consciousness are vital opportunities to awaken to a deeper continuity in consciousness. It is in this light that one should view the immemorial teachings of *Gupta Vidya*: nothing on this earth has real duration, nothing remains for a moment without change."

Meditation thought: A familiar sense of continuity can conceal constant change. Releasing a mistaken picture of oneself may open a more searching inquiry into what continuity means.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Spiritual Wakefulness", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 220.

"The blurring sense of duration that accompanies sensory awareness, like the blurred impression on the retina caused by an electric spark, is due to identification with transitory form. It is impossible to gain a right perception of reality, of the relationship of the immortal soul to its evolving vestures, without withdrawing attention from such nebulous images of personal consciousness."

Meditation thought: The felt persistence of an image is not proof of an unchanging self. Consider how a remembered impression can appear continuous while its present interpretation keeps altering.

11. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 20.

"For mind is like a mirror; it gathers dust while it reflects. It needs the gentle breezes of Soul-Wisdom to brush away the dust of our illusions. Seek, O Beginner, to blend thy Mind and Soul. Shun ignorance, and likewise shun illusion."

Meditation thought: The mirror can be clarified without being despised. Patient self-correction makes attention more receptive to truth and less occupied with defending its existing reflections.

12. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 143.

"No Theosophist ought to be contented with an idle or frivolous life, doing no real good to himself and still less to others. He should work for the benefit of the few who need his help if he is unable to toil for Humanity, and thus work for the advancement of the Theosophical cause."

Meditation thought: The use of consciousness is tested in practical benefit. A modest act of real assistance can give study a direction beyond the accumulation of ideas.