



In-depth Guide

On Terminology, Vocabulary, and Language Issues

Last update: June 2, 2026

a) General Considerations

1) The Pitfalls of Terminology

As Paul Brunton noted:

It may be that religion will have to be presented in non-religious language if we are to get away from dogma that has never been questioned, from terms that have become hollow and empty, from an approach which has a boring effect. It may be that the new and more appealing presentation will use art, music, the discoveries of science, and the offering of meditation to reach the consciousness of today.

It is dangerous to use terminologies and vocabularies which the past and the present have associated with particular cults, movements, groups, and organizations. It is better to find new ways of presenting spiritual truths, new words with which to name them.

Despite these reservations, Brunton often had no choice but to use conventional religious terminology. Many “loaded” terms cannot easily be substituted without losing nuance, which is why they appear frequently across the texts published by UR. To read these authors fairly, we must carefully discern how each individual applies these terms and what specific meanings they intend.

A prime example is the word *God*. This single religious term has been interpreted, shaped, and conceptualized in as many ways as there are cults and creeds. This historical ambiguity has fueled widespread skepticism, driving many to declare the non-existence of God altogether. Ideally, we should avoid mentally linking such universal terms exclusively to specific institutions or organizations, whether religious or secular.

Modern society displays a pronounced tendency to reject the “religious” wholesale—either because religion is associated with historical atrocities or because of its persistent adherence to obsolete dogmas. However, for many modern seekers, breaking away from institutionalized religion does not mean abandoning the spiritual life; rather, it often serves to deepen and reinforce it. This growing cultural movement is widely discussed as the “Spiritual but not religious” phenomenon.

Ultimately, we should always emphasize the *substance* of a message over the linguistic *forms* framing it. This ensures that language does not become a barrier to perceiving the true scope of the core principles set forth in UR concerning Universal Life.

2) “For Want of a Better Term”

Brunton frequently deployed the phrase “for want of a better term” when attempting to capture nuanced concepts or situations that defy easy interpretation. Consider these two notes:

The Absolute is both everywhere and nowhere. It cannot be considered in spatial terms. Even the word “infinite” is really such a term. If it is used here because no other is available, let it be clearly understood, then, that it is used merely as a suggestive metaphor.

For want of a better term, we have sometimes designated the highly advanced meditation exercises here given as “ultramystic”—for a study of them will reveal that the common or popular forms of yoga do not exhaust the possibilities of man's quest of the Overself.

In other contexts, he emphasized that even the most precise language falls short of capturing absolute Reality:

There are no words in human language in which Truth can find adequate expression

Whatever men may say about it will not be enough to describe it properly, justly, accurately. All such efforts will be clumsy but they will not be useless. They will be suggestive, offer clues perhaps, each in its own way.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Brunton and similar authors for their tireless effort to discover the most appropriate terms to bring maximum clarity to their core insights. For instance, though Brunton initially used “philosophical mysticism” to distinguish his approach from conventional mysticism, he later refined his vocabulary:

“Mystical philosophy” is a better term than “philosophical mysticism.”

His writings contain numerous instances where he systematically upgraded his vocabulary. For example:

“Independent of” seems a better term than “detached from” (outside things).

“Awareness” is not enough to describe full enlightenment. “Knowingness” includes it but goes farther and is hence a better term.

3) Shared Concepts and Shifting Vocabularies

In spiritual literature, different terms frequently point to the exact same underlying concept. Therefore, identifying sets of interchangeable synonyms is highly useful for eliminating confusion. Many authors deliberately craft a specialized terminology to present their ideas with greater precision.

Conversely, readers must also navigate instances where the *same* terminology is used to describe *different* concepts. In these cases, meanings may overlap, but their precise alignment depends entirely on the context.

4) Navigating Unintentionally Pejorative Terms

When translating texts, certain words or phrases that are entirely neutral in their source language can take on a pejorative or negative connotation in the target language.

This can occur even within the same language when it spans vast global territories (such as English or Spanish). When authors or translators from different geographical regions interact, subtle linguistic shifts can inadvertently introduce a pejorative tone. Readers should keep these regional differences in mind, interpreting seemingly harsh language through the author’s original intent and the broader context of the passage.

5) Capitalization Rules for “Key Terms”

Standardizing capitalization is notoriously difficult. Not only do different authors use vastly divergent criteria for capitalizing key terms, but individual authors are often inconsistent across their own writings.

In editing these materials, we have confined ourselves to minor, essential corrections to harmonize capitalization across texts. For the most part, we have left the text as it originally appeared in published books and online sources.

b) Commentary on Particular Terms

Mystical and spiritual philosophy features an expansive global literature filled with terms that mean different things to different people. It is highly beneficial to clarify these meanings, paying close attention to how specific authors utilize them within particular disciplines.

The terms and phrases selected below are drawn primarily from Paul Brunton’s literature. Highlighting them serves to clarify their meanings and protect the reader from common misunderstandings.

Mind / Mind-in-Itself vs. World-Mind

Brunton clarifies the distinction between these foundational concepts in the following notes:

There has been so much friction and clash between the different religions because of this idea: whether God is personal or impersonal—so much persecution, even hatred, so unnecessarily. I say unnecessarily because the difference between the two conceptions is only an apparent one. Mind is the source of all; this is Mind inactive. Mind as World-Mind-in-manifestation is the personal God. Between essence and manifestation the only difference is that essence is hidden and manifestation is known. World-Mind is personal (in the sense of being what the Hindus call “Ishvara”); Mind is totally impersonal. Basically, the two are one.

It would, however, be a mistake to consider the World-Mind as one entity and Mind as another separate from it. It would be truer to consider World-Mind as the active function of Mind. Mind cannot be separated from its powers. The two are one. In its quiescent state it is simply Mind. In its active state it is World-Mind... when expressing itself in act and immanent in the universe, it is the World-Mind.

An ever-active Mind within an ever-still Mind—that is the real truth, not only about God but also about man.

In using the name “Mind” for God, I but follow some of the highest examples from antiquity, such as Aristotle in Greece, Hermes Trismegistus in Egypt, Asvaghosha in India, and the Patriarch Hui Neng in China.

Contextual Note: Depending on the context, Brunton uses “World-Mind” in a few distinct ways: to denote “the Mind of this world, our Holy Mother Earth”; to mean the collective Mind of the entire manifested Universe; or, occasionally, to parallel Plotinus’ concept of the “Intellectual Principle” or the pure activity of Mind.

Across traditions, Brunton notes several exact equivalents:

The following are equivalent terms for one and the same thing: Original Pure Mind of Zen Buddhism, Pure Consciousness of Vedanta, Alaya of Mahayana Buddhism.

“soul” (human) vs. “Soul” (divine), and PB’s term “Overself”

Brunton famously observed that the word “soul” is so ambiguous that the *Oxford English Dictionary* attributes no fewer than twenty-five distinct meanings to it. To resolve this, we can look to two primary definitions:

1. **Meaning 1 (soul – usually lowercase):** The part of a person that is not physical and experiences deep feelings and emotions. This refers to the evolving, individualized human consciousness—the **human soul**. Synonyms include “the separate personality,” “the ego entity,” “personal ego,” “the thought-self,” or “the externalized mind.” *(Note: While spiritual texts often call for “renouncing the ego or self,” this actually means renouncing the selfish, dominating impulses of egoism—not destroying the ego itself, which serves as our necessary functional instrument during physical incarnation).*
2. **Meaning 2 (Soul – usually capitalized):** The spiritual part of a person that continues to exist in some form after the body has died. This signifies our universal, impersonal, and divine essence—the **divine Soul**. Paul Brunton specifically coined the term Overself to refer to it.

Brunton describes this intersection:

There is some point in each individual being where the human and the divine must join, where man's little consciousness bends low before, or blends subtly with, the Universal Mind which is his ultimate source. It is impossible to describe that intersection in any terms which shall adequately fit it, but it can be named. In philosophy it is the Overself.

Brunton acknowledged his own fluid use of the term:

The term “Overself” was used in one sense in some passages of the books and in another sense in other passages. This is confusing to the philosophically minded. However, these books were written primarily to extend the doctrine of mysticism or meditation. From this standpoint, the inner self of man is the goal; from the philosophic standpoint, the Universal Self is the goal. The latter, of course, includes the former.

The successful mystic certainly comes into contact with his real “I.” But if this contact is dependent upon meditational trance, it is necessarily an intermittent one. He cannot obtain a permanent contact unless he proceeds further and widens his aspiration to achieve contact with the universal “I.” There is therefore a difference between the interior “I” and the universal “I,” but it is a difference only of degree, not of kind, for the latter includes the former.

Intuition vs. Insight

Brunton carefully demarcated these two terms in his notebooks:

“Intuition” had come to lose its pristine value for me. I cast about for a better one and found it in “insight”. This term I assigned to the highest knowing-faculty of sages and was thus able to treat the term “intuition” as something inferior which was sometimes amazingly correct but not infrequently hopelessly wrong in its guidance, reports, or premonition.

Only after reason matures to its fullest extent can we look to the dawning of a perfect intuition, or “insight” as I prefer to call it.

No single human faculty is alone adequate to the search for truth. All must be used, including intuition, and finally crowned by a new one—insight.

The term “insight” has a special application in philosophy. Its results are stamped with a certitude beyond mere belief, better than logical demonstration, superior to limited sense observation.

Please note: The term *insight* is frequently used today in the fields of psychology and cognitive science, so it is important to distinguish between its meaning in those fields and the metaphysical one:

Cognitive and psychological insight

Definition: A sudden reorganization of mental elements that enables one to solve a problem or understand a situation.

Nature: It is immanent, psychological, and the result of brain processing (often unconscious).

Scope: It is limited to the resolution of logical, creative, emotional, or personal problems.

Permanence: It is a momentary flash, a single event of understanding (“Aha!”).

Mystical (or spiritual, philosophical, metaphysical) insight

Definition: A spiritual faculty for directly grasping absolute truths and divine realities.

Nature: It is transcendent, suprarational, and does not depend on discursive reason (ratio).

Scope: It connects human beings with the sacred, the Overself, or the unity of the cosmos.

Duration: It aspires to a state of continuous contemplation and stable wisdom.

Common ground

Immediacy: Both are experienced suddenly, without going through a step-by-step process of deduction.

Certainty: One and the other generate a profound sense of undeniable truth.

Transcendence: The two go beyond linear logic or ordinary thinking to reveal a higher perspective.

In summary: Psychological insight illuminates the human mind; spiritual insight illuminates the soul.

Paul Brunton often used the term *insight* without any adjective, referring to *mystical insight*; if in any passage he referred to *psychological insight*, he did so by clearly indicating the corresponding adjective (*psychological insight*).

Cosmic Consciousness

Brunton warned against the casual deployment of this phrase:

The term “cosmic consciousness” is used rather loosely by different writers. It has been equated with different kinds of mystic experience and different grades of intuition and insight. Because of this ambiguity, it is best to try to avoid the use of this term; but, when found, it should be judged by the context wherein it appears.

One of the uses of the term “cosmic consciousness” is certainly to indicate what has been called “unitary” consciousness. Judging by the experience of at least one advanced mystic, its most appropriate application as a name would be to the experience whereby one is able to identify oneself with all other living creatures, in feeling and in intelligence. Many mystics are referring to this when they speak of “love.”

Master vs. Guru

In spiritual circles, these words are frequently tossed around as basic synonyms alongside *teacher*, *guide*, *preceptor*, *counselor*, or *prophet*.

Guru is a Sanskrit term rooted in Hinduism and Buddhism. While it originally meant a spiritual guide, late 20th-century Western adoption watered the term down to describe any secular expert who teaches a specific professional discipline.

Brunton added semantic clarity by breaking down three distinct Sanskrit roles:

It could be said that to put fine points upon these three Sanskrit words which are used so loosely today might be helpful to students. First, the word “guru” applies to one who opens the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. The title “swami” applies to one who provides spiritual teaching for the ignorant. The term “acharya” applies to one who provides the best example of spiritual conduct.

He also warned that the English word *Master* is heavily compromised:

The mystical and cultist circles which talk much about these matters use the name “Master” to trail such an accumulation behind it of falsified facts, superstitious notions, and nonsensical thinking, that it is needful to be on guard for semantic definition whenever this term is heard.

The Sage

The definition of a “sage” splits sharply between East and West:

- **In the West:** A sage is broadly understood to be an intellectually learned or academic person.
 - **In the East:** A Sage (frequently capitalized in our texts) represents a human being who has attained spiritual realization, enlightenment, or liberation. They have shaken off the “ignorance” of identifying exclusively with the temporary ego, physical body, and changing emotions, resting instead in their real essence: the universal Soul.
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Bodhisattva

Brunton beautifully captures the core meaning of this Buddhist ideal:

This ideal of a spiritualized worldly life on the part of an illumine is held even where it might be thought the last place to be found—in Buddhism. For of the three Goals it sets before men, the last is that of the Bodhisattva. Linguistically, the term means one who is bent upon wisdom but technically the term means one who is destined to become a Buddha. Practically, it means one who stands on the very threshold, as it were, of Nirvana, but refuses to enter because he wishes to remain behind and relieve suffering humanity. This tremendous self-sacrifice indicates the tremendous spirit of compassion which actuates him. “I cannot have pleasure while another grieves and I have the power to help,” said Gautama while yet a Bodhisattva. For he refuses to break his ties with common humanity. Thus, he is reborn in the most diverse bodies, environments, and ranks and undergoes the most varied vicissitudes, thus giving the benefit of his altruistic presence on the most universal and large-hearted scale.

Philosophy vs. Sagehood

Brunton acknowledged that the word “philosophy” was an imperfect fit for his work:

The word “philosophy” is really insufficient for my purposes. I have always considered its unsatisfactory usage to be tentative and temporary, but it will have to be continued until an alternative can be found.

However, he later advocated for reclaiming the term to equate the true philosopher with the spiritual sage:

I want to restore this word to its ancient dignity. I want it used for the highest kind of insight into the Truth of things, which means into the Truth of the unique Reality. I want the philosopher to be equated with the sage, the man who not only knows this Truth, has this insight, and experiences this Reality in meditation, but also, although in a modified form, in action amid the world's turmoil.

Faith: From Credulity to Conviction

The word “faith” harbors a deceptive ambivalence, containing two near-opposite meanings that can easily obscure the context of a phrase:

1. **Faith as Blind Credulity:** Simple belief in a doctrine or teacher without rigorous, critical evaluation. This is a defensive mechanism of the personal ego, signaling a position of underlying psychological weakness.
 2. **Faith as Spiritual Conviction:** Absolute, unshakeable confidence in absolute Truth. This stems directly from the Overself and represents an immense spiritual strength.
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Spirit

“Spirit” suffers from severe semantic inflation because different authors apply it carelessly. It is often used interchangeably with both lowercase *soul* (the human self) and capitalized *Soul* (the divine essence). At other times, it is used to denote the supreme *Divine Consciousness*, *God*, or *Mind*, while the phrase *Holy Spirit* is occasionally used to signify the *Overself*.

Compounding this is the term's cultural baggage; historical misuses related to modern “spiritism” or occult associations with “evil spirits” have left it with a compromised reputation. To safeguard clarity and prevent unnecessary confusion, we intentionally minimize our use of the word “Spirit,” opting instead for precise synonyms suited to the exact context.

Maya

Brunton offers vital clarity on this foundational Sanskrit concept across multiple notes:

The world does exist, we are surrounded by it, and usually we apply the term to something that does not exist. It will be more correct to translate the term Maya not by “unreal” but by ‘not what we think it to be. We must not deny the existence of the world—that would be lunacy—but we must try to get a correct understanding of its hidden nature.

To say that the world is maya is to say that it is changing, dependent, relative, mysterious, and illusory.

It is truer to say that the world is an appearance than that it is an illusion, an experience rather than an unreality.

Brahman, Atman, and the Ultimate Inquiry

In Hindu philosophy, **Brahman** represents the ultimate Supreme Being—what Brunton identifies as “Mind Itself.” In turn, **Atman** is Brahman indwelling within the individual—the localized Overself or Soul.

Brunton outlines this depth:

The meditational aspect of the quest... is like a spiral: it goes down deeper and deeper... as in advancing from the level of “the world of maya,” casting off the illusory, to “the world is Brahman, the Real.” Growth accrues with each circulation and further penetration...

Why I chose “What Am I”: (1) Because I wanted to start with the idea of a non-“I” consciousness instead of their own “I” with which they are continuously occupied; (2) Because the word Brahman is of neuter gender, neither masculine nor feminine. Brahman in us is Atman, the Self—but utterly impersonal. “What” lends itself more easily to this impersonality than “Who”...

Mentalism in Philosophy

While the term “mentalism” is associated with theatrical stage magic or branches of cognitive psychology in the English-speaking world, its definition as a strict philosophical concept is robustly defined in major references like the *Collins Dictionary*:

- **British English:** The doctrine that mind is the fundamental reality and that objects of knowledge exist only as aspects of the subject's consciousness.
- **American English:** The doctrine that objects of knowledge have no existence except in the mind of the perceiver.

Brunton details the lineage of this thought in Western philosophy:

The European thinkers who worked out the mentalistic basis of life with intellectual thoroughness—although not always with correctness—were German; Kant, Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Hegel, Schiller, and Fichte saw and taught that Mind was the primal reality and that the world was an idea in Mind.

Tao and Teh

Brunton contextualizes these crucial Eastern terms through observations:

The term Tao, as used by Lao Tzu, does not refer to the World-Mind, that which is responsible for the manifested universe, but to the pure, essential being of Mind-in-itself. What I have called the World-Mind, he calls Teh.

Tao, in its secondary meaning, is the divinely fixed order of things.

Yin and Yang

Rooted in Taoist philosophy, this terminology describes the immutable universal law of “opposites and complementaries” (mirrored in Hinduism as the *pairs of opposites* found in the *Bhagavad Gita*).

Brunton highlights their intersection with the cosmic elements:

The Supreme Ultimate, a term Chou Tun-Yi took from the 'Book of Changes' is infinite and imperishable, and the source of the cosmos... Yin and Yang are evolved out of the Supreme Ultimate. They are the negative and positive, the quiescent and active, female and male, soft and hard, dark and bright principle. Through their interaction they bring about all phenomena...

True Meditation

Brunton notes the inherent linguistic ambiguity surrounding meditation in modern dialogue:

“Meditation” is not really a safe term to use nowadays. For instance for most people it means thinking about a theme, but for other groups it holds the very opposite meaning—non-thinking.

(We should understand “non-thinking” here as an intentional inner silence—a deep emptying of the mind from mental chatter, particularly thoughts rooted in negative emotional states).

Because meditation shifts meanings depending on context, we specify “**true meditation**” here to denote practices explicitly aiming at the spiritual realm, without invalidating generic forms of focus. Brunton illustrates this distinction:

To be free from attachment to all external objects is true meditation. To meditate thus means to realize the tranquility of the Essence of Mind.

Meditation is inner work to attain the soul's presence. It is sometimes quickly resultful, but more often goes on for a long time before that attainment is realized.

Yoga

Though yoga is universally recognized in the West today, its meaning has drifted substantially from its historical origins. Brunton traces its journey and highlights its modern ambiguity:

The contemporary definition of the word yoga in India is “union with God.” To a philosopher this is an unsatisfactory one. For originally the word, when split into its syllables ya and gam, meant “the way to go.” Later it came to mean “the way to perfection.” But in both cases the application of this term was not limited to God as a goal, although He was a common one...

The basic principle of yoga, which is the cultivation of power to withdraw attention from the external world to the internal self, stands for all time and all peoples. I therefore believe it better to separate it from the accidents and traditions of history and geography, to free it from local accretions and universalize it. But if this is done it is perhaps wiser not to use the term “yoga” and thus to avoid confusion.

Mindfulness vs. Presence to the Overself

Mindfulness has achieved immense contemporary popularity. Originally taught by the Buddha 2,600 years ago as a primary cornerstone of meditation, it is defined by modern dictionaries as: *“the practice of being aware of your body, mind, and feelings in the present moment, thought to create a feeling of calm.”*

Brunton contrasts this baseline standard with its highest spiritual application:

Be present at your thinking and breathing and feeling and doing. This is what the Buddha called “mindfulness.” But the highest possible form of mindfulness is to be present with the Overself for, after all, the other four are concerned with the ego, even though they are attempts to free yourself from it; but here it concerns that which completely transcends the ego.

The Center of His Being

Brunton defines exactly what this localized phrasing implies:

Whenever I have used the term “the centre of his being,” I have referred to a state of meditation, to an experience which is felt at a certain stage. The very art of meditation is a drawing inwards and the finer, the more delicate, the subtler this indrawing becomes, the closer it is to this central point of consciousness. But from the point of view of philosophy, meditation and its experiences are not the ultimate goal—although they may help in preparing one for that goal. In that goal there is no kind of centre to be felt nor any circumference either—one is without being localized anywhere with reference to the body, one is both in the body and in the Overself.

Heaven, Paradise, and the Heavenly Kingdom

Brunton reframes these traditional religious descriptions through an experiential lens:

In the depths of meditation, when one is sitting still and enchanted, all egoism gone for the moment and all care suspended, it is possible to understand what the word “Heaven” really means.

When this truth is at last seen, that heaven is not a place in space but a condition of being, and that therefore it can to a certain extent be realized even before death, a feeling of joy and a sense of adventure are felt...

If a man could withdraw sufficiently from his ego to stop letting its interests and desires overpower him, he would thereby let peace come to triumph in his heart. The true paradise, the real heavenly kingdom, which has been postponed by an ignorant clergy to the post-mortem world, thus becoming far-off and elusive, is in fact as near to us as our own selves, and as present as today. If we are to enter it, we can and must enter while yet in the flesh. It is not a time or place but a state of life and a stage of development. It is the ego-free life.

On “Happiness”

When encountering the word “happiness,” readers should carefully distinguish between its two main forms:

1. **Worldly happiness:** This is the kind experienced through pleasures, social success, material possessions, and external circumstances. Although it brings immediate delight, it is fleeting, depends on external factors, and is therefore vulnerable to change.
2. **Inner happiness:** This is the result of a genuine understanding of existence; that is, the boundless joy that arises from being fully aware of the Everlasting Universal Life. It is an unshakable happiness.

Since in many texts authors use the term generically without explicitly indicating this distinction, the context of the text will always be the best indicator for discerning which type of happiness is being referred to at any given moment.

On PB's Use of the Term “Reason”

Paul Brunton's specific application of the term “Reason” often departs from purely intellectual connotations. He provides clarification in the following notes:

What was called “Reason” in 'The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga' and what was honoured as “Reason” by the Cambridge Platonists is a mystical plus intellectual faculty and not merely an intellectual one. It is not merely a coexistence but a fusion of the two capacities.

My use of the term “reason,” although with a capital “R” in 'The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga,' seems to have been misunderstood by several persons. This forced me to add an appendix to the chapters in order to clear the matter in their mind. Reasoning, in its highest sense, transcends mere logic and welcomes the alliance of meditation; out of their union comes wisdom, peace, balance, and so, blessing.

There is a translation from the Sanskrit of the Katha Upanishad made by Professor Mishra of the University of Barcelona, published with a preface by Suresh Radhakrishnan, President of India, who was then lecturing at Oxford University. In this translation there are two verses which use the term. Here is the first: “The man whose chariot is driven by reason holding well the reins of his mind, reaches the end of his journey, the Supreme Pervading Spirit.” And the other verse is: “Beyond the senses is the mind, and beyond mind is reason (lost). Beyond reason is the great Self.”

The Term “Transparency” in Spiritual Literature

The concept of “transparency” is frequently employed to describe advanced mystic and spiritual experiences. Brunton highlights its cross-cultural presence in the following notes:

For the meaning and use of the term “transparency” in describing mystic experience, note:

(a) Mabel Collins' book on Patanjali uses the title The Transparent Jewel, (b) The Chinese painter Pata Shan-Jen (seventeenth century): “When the mind is transparent and pure as if reflected on the mirrorlike surface of water; when it is serene . . .” (c) A modern Chinese writer on art, Juo Chang Chung-yuan: “There is a calmness . . . the atmosphere is of rare transparency, . . . his innermost being tranquil.”

He feels that he is now in the very centre of his being, that he has shifted identity there. The ego no longer covers it over and occupies his whole view. Rather is it now transparent to the light radiating from this centre. This transparency is peace.

Meaning of the Sanskrit Term “Dharma”

Although this foundational Sanskrit term carries various complex meanings across different traditions, Brunton offers a beautifully concise summary:

Dharma = moral living

Meaning of the Sanskrit Term “Turiya”

Brunton provides key practical guidance on this lesser-known metaphysical term:

What is called “Turiya” or the “fourth state” in Sanskrit, although it is neither waking, dreaming, nor sleeping, is related however to all three as their background. Therefore, before one falls asleep it comes into play. Before one wakes up in the morning it also comes into play. Or before a dream comes to an end and deep sleep supervenes, it comes into play. >

>This is why either the practice of meditation or the brief practice of spiritual remembrance at any of these three natural pause periods takes the fullest advantage of them. This is also why during the interval between two separate thoughts, it comes into play. Thus, throughout a man's life, he's comfortably being brought back into touch with his divine Self. But because his face is turned the other way and he's looking in the wrong direction, he never takes advantage and becomes aware of that Self.

Meaning of “the Void” in the Writings of PB

“The Void” carries distinct operational meanings depending on the discipline and surrounding context. In Brunton's writings, the phrase serves to illustrate three distinct yet deeply interrelated concepts:

1. **The Void of All Mental Activity (or Void of Being):** The complete emptying of concepts, images, thoughts, and sensory perceptions from the mind. It acts as a transitional state—a profound “shock” or “death” that allows the consciousness to escape the web of ego-thoughts.
2. **The Void of Being (as Ego-Annihilation):** The absolute surrender and dissolution of the personal ego. It represents the abandonment of worldly attachments and the total cessation of the suffering, frustration, and anxiety inherent to material existence.
3. **The Void as “Behind All That Exists”:** The ultimate, unmanifest source—an immense abyss of limitless space. It is the Eternal Silence standing behind all evolutionary activities; the Mother of all existence.

Consider these four clarifying notes from Brunton:

The “Void” means void of all mental activity and productivity. It means that the notions and images of the mind have been emptied out, that all perceptions of the body and conceptions of the brain have gone...

What we call here the Void, following the Mongolian-Tibetan tradition, is not dissimilar from what Spanish Saint John of the Cross called “complete detachment and emptiness of spirit.” It is a casting-out of all impressions from the mind, an elimination of every remembered or imagined experience from it, a turning-away from every idea even psychically referable to the five senses and the ego; finally, even a loss of personal identity.

If the thought of death horrifies so many people, the thought of the void—of the utter annihilation of ego, of the abandonment of everything and of the cessation of suffering, frustration, and anxiety which belong to life in the world—is a welcome idea for those who think more deeply. But since life is only partly suffering, since there are also joys and satisfactions in it and positive values which ought not to suffer destruction, a better balanced view is provided by philosophy and that is that consciousness, real consciousness, cannot die, but only returns to its ultimate source.

What we have called “the void” is the same as what medieval German mystics like Tauler and Boehme have called “the abyss.” It is the Eternal Silence behind all activities and evolutions, the Mother of all that exists.

A Warning Against Mere “Blankness”

Brunton notes that “the Void” must not be confused with simple mental inertia or “blankness,” which can otherwise give a contradictory impression in *The Notebooks*:

Philosophy does not teach people to make their minds a blank, does not say empty out all thoughts, be inert and passive. It teaches the reduction of all thinking activity to a single seed-thought, and that one is to be either interrogative like “What Am I?” or affirmative like “The godlike is with me.” It is true that the opening-up of Overself-consciousness will, in the first delicate experience, mean the closing-down of the last thoughts, the uttermost stillness of mind. But that stage will pass. It will repeat itself again whenever one plunges into the deepest trance, the raptest meditative absorption. >

>And it must then come of itself, induced by the Overself's grace, not by the lower self's force. Otherwise, mere mental blankness is a risky condition to be avoided by prudent seekers. It involves the risk of mediumship and of being possessed.

To seek mental blankness as a direct objective is to mistake an effect for a cause. It is true that some of the inferior yogis do so, trying by forcible means like suppression of the breath to put all thoughts out of the mind. But this is not advocated by philosophy.

Important Caveat: In spiritual philosophy, “the Void” must never be associated with the popular, psychological phrase “existential void.” The latter aligns much more closely with what mystics term “the dark night of the soul” (explored thoroughly in Article A240229 on the UR website).

Meanings of “Contemplation” and “Sahaja”: Nirvikalpa Samadhi vs. Sahaja Samadhi

The term “contemplation” carries distinctly different meanings depending on its framework:

- **In Christian Mysticism:** It holds a broad biblical meaning related to devotional focus and prayer.
- **In Academic Philosophy:** It denotes deep reflection, mental immersion, and the rigorous consideration of existential issues to uncover the truth and meaning of life, explicitly distinct from passive observation.
- **In Eastern Philosophy:** It translates the Sanskrit term *samadhi* (from *sama* meaning “together” and *dhi* meaning “mind”), indicating a state of profound concentration. Across traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Yoga, *samadhi* represents an enlightened state where the localized “I” dissolves into the object of focus, the Universe, or the Divine.

Brunton clarifies the levels of this state—specifically distinguishing between *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* and *Sahaja Samadhi*:

This mysterious experience seems also to have been known to Dionysius the Areopagite. It is definitely an experience terminating the process of meditation, for the mystic can then go no higher and no deeper. It is variously called “the Nought” in the West and “Nirvikalpa Samadhi” in the East. Everything in the world vanishes and along with the world goes the personal ego; nothing indeed is left except Consciousness-in-itself. If anything can burrow under the foundation of the ego and unsettle its present and future stability, it is this awesome event.

Following contemplation comes “application”—the practice of bringing this inner calm down into everyday life, which ultimately triggers the permanent state of *Sahaja*:

In deepest contemplation, the Nirvikalpa Samadhi of the Indian yogis, both egolessness and blissful peace can be experienced. But it is a temporary state; return to the world must follow, so the quest is not finished. The next step or stage is application, putting into the active everyday life this egoless detachment and this satisfying calmness.

The constant application of meditation to the activity of knowledge, to behaviour, thought, and feeling, eventually brings about a continuous awareness. This is called Sahaja.

The crucial test that separates these two advanced states of Overself-awareness is summarized below:

What is the difference between the state of deepest contemplation, which the Hindus call nirvikalpa samadhi, and that which they call sahaja samadhi? The first is only a temporary experience, that is it begins and ends but the man actually experiences an uplift of consciousness, he gains a new and higher outlook. >

>But sahaja is continuous unbroken realization that as Overself he always was, is, and shall be. It is not a feeling that something new and higher has been gained. What is the absolute test which distinguishes one condition from the other, since both are awareness of the Overself? In nirvikalpa the ego vanishes but reappears when the ordinary state is resumed: hence it has only been lulled, even though it has been slightly weakened by the process. In “Sahaja” the ego is rooted out once and for all! It not only vanishes, but it cannot reappear.

On the Use of “Impersonal” or “Impersonality”

While a generic dictionary might define “impersonal” as something cold, ordinary, or lacking in individual originality, the word takes on an entirely positive, elevated meaning within philosophical and spiritual contexts. Broadly, it marks a state of healthy “impartiality or equanimity,” rather than cold carelessness.

Spiritual authors generally use it to describe two distinct concepts:

1. **The Ego-Free Condition (1):** Actively preventing the personal ego from interfering with one's consciousness and actions.
2. **Immaterial or Infinite Realities (2):** Realities that do not exist as localized human personalities (such as the impersonal God, impersonal Wisdom, or the impersonal Overself).

Brunton expands on these two definitions:

Context 1: Moving Beyond Ego-Personality

Many aspirants wrongly believe the quest to be a movement from one psychic experience to another or from one mystical ecstasy to another. But in fact it is a movement in character from animality to purity, from egoism to impersonality.

The more we try to put impersonality into our thought and life, the less we are likely to identify ourselves with the ego. This makes way, makes room, gives place for that which is behind the ego to begin to manifest itself.

Those who prefer their own ego's opinion to the Overself's impersonal intuitions, remain in the ego's darkness.

Context 2: Merging into Impersonal Consciousness

This withdrawal of attention from the immediate environment which occurs when deeply immersed in thought, looking at the distant part of a landscape, or raptly listening to inspired music, is the “I” coming closer to its innermost nature. At the deepest level of this experience, the ego-thought vanishes and ‘I-myself’ becomes merged in the impersonal Consciousness.

I will try to show forth in my personal life, thought, and feeling the perfect harmony which already belongs to the impersonal Overself within me.

Meanings of “Wu-Wei”

Literally translated from Taoist and Zen philosophies as “non-doing” or “non-action,” *Wu-wei* is frequently misunderstood on the internet as a call to lazy, passive resignation.

In philosophy, however, its deeper meaning is highly active:

- **The Interruption of Egoic Will:** It marks an intentional choice to stop the ego from interfering with life. It is “the doing of the heart” or “the doing of the Inner Self,” letting life flow naturally according to the Tao.
- **Detached Action:** Engaging in outer activities without personal, selfish attachment to outcomes. It is a state where the unmoving inner self produces meaningful outer movement.

Therefore, true *Wu-wei* is actually a profound “yes-doing”—the active work of the Overself stepping forward as the ego-personality steps back.

Meaning of “Glimpse” in the Writings of Paul Brunton

Brunton specifically uses the word “Glimpse” to denote a temporary, brief experience of spiritual awakening that drastically improves an individual's self-understanding.

A glimpse is a transitory state of mental enlightenment and emotional exaltation. It is an experience of self-discovery. The experience explains a man to himself for the first time, lights up the fact that he lives in two planes at one and the same time. It reveals his ego as the illusion which envelops his consciousness and his Overself as the reality behind his consciousness.

The purpose of this brief glimpse is to call us to more serious, more frequent, and sterner efforts, and to arouse in us increased ardours of moral self-improvement. It has shown us our finest potentialities of virtue; now we have to realize them. All elements of personality must be adjusted to the ideal shown by the glimpse, as the whole personality itself has to be surrendered to it. A work lasting several years may be rooted in a flash lasting only a few minutes...

The Glimpse is in very truth a magic spell cast over a man's whole being so that he neither feels nor reacts as he did before. For a short time he is born again, a new person.

With the glimpse there comes a curious feeling of absolute certitude, happy certitude, utter doubtlessness. The truth is there plainly before him and deeply sensed within him. He knows now that God IS and ‘where’ he is.

Meaning of “Grace” in Philosophical-Spiritual Literature

While standard theology often limits “Grace” to a specific divine assistance given to withstand temptation, spiritual literature defines it far more broadly as the loving, ever-present mercy of the Source.

Brunton and Ramana Maharshi outline its non-arbitrary nature:

Grace is the benign effluence of the Overself, the kindly radiation from it, ever-present in us. The theological use of this term to mean particular help given by God to man to enable him to endure temptation and act rightly is a serious and arbitrary narrowing down of its original meaning. It may mean this sometimes, but it also means the loving mercy God shows to man, which appears variously as enlightenment of the mind or relief of the heart, as change of outward physical conditions or a dynamic revolution-working energy acting on the aspirant or on his life.

It is not within the power of man to finish either the purificatory work or its illumination-sequel: his Overself, by its action within his psyche, must bring that about. This activating power is Grace.

The real Short Path is really the discovery that there is no path at all: only a being still and thus letting the Overself do the work needed. This is the meaning of Grace.

Grace does not depend on God's intervention in any favouritistic or arbitrary manner. It is not an effect of God's whim or caprice. It falls like sunlight on all, the good and evil alike. Each individual can receive it, according to the quantity of obstacles he removes from its path.

Grace is always there. You just need to surrender to it. It is your Self itself. It is not something that can be acquired from outside of you. If it is external, it is useless. In the end, all that is needed is to know that its existence is in you. You are never out of its reach. — Ramana Maharshi

The Phrase “Unite with God”

Brunton explicitly warns against the dualistic error embedded in this popular phrase:

Those mystics who talk of becoming united with God have fallen into the dualistic fallacy. They talk as though God were separate and apart from themselves. The truth is that they already exist within God and do not need to become united with Him. What they need is to become conscious of Him—which is a different matter.

The mystic's endeavour to unite with God—much more his claim to achieve it—is without meaning if God is the Ultimate and the Unique. No finite limited human intelligence could ever directly communicate with the infinite and illimitable Mystery or give and receive love from it. All this has meaning only when the concept of the Overself is introduced. This Overself is what the successful mystics of all religions have really achieved union with, despite the widely different names from “God” downwards, which they have given it.

It is legitimate to say that something godlike is within me, but it is quite illegitimate to say, “I am God.” For the fragrance of a flower is after all not the same as the flower itself.

Jesus' Injunction: “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself”

Brunton reframes this classic scriptural command to rescue it from unworkable emotional sentimentality:

What did Jesus mean when he enjoined his disciples to love their neighbours as themselves? Did he mean the sentimental, emotional, and hail-fellow-well-met attitude which the churches teach? How could he when in order to become what he was, he had once to hate and turn aside from that part of himself, the lower part—that is, the ego and the animal nature—which is mostly what neighbours show forth? If his disciples were taught to hate, and not to love, their egos, how then could they love the ego-dominated humanity amidst which they found themselves? >

>The injunction “Love thy neighbour” has often led to confusion... which forces many to refuse to accept it. And they are the ones who do not understand its meaning but misinterpret it to mean “Like thy neighbour!” The correct meaning of this age-old ethical injunction is “Practise compassion in your physical behaviour and exercise goodwill in your mental attitude towards your neighbour.” Everyone can do this even when he cannot bring himself to like his neighbour. Therefore, this injunction is not a wholly impracticable one as some believe, but quite the contrary.

Clarifying “True Love”

True spiritual love is completely distinct from transactional affection or physical impulse:

Although we have stated in ‘The Wisdom of the Overself’ that a love restricted to the limited circle of wife, family, or friends is unphilosophic and should be extended in universal compassion to all mankind, this should not be mistaken to mean that such a restricted love ought to be abandoned. On the contrary, it should have its fullest place within the larger one. We have also written in the same book that “love” is one of the most misused words in English. >

>We may now add that “love” is also one of the most debased words. Why? Because, very often, it is based on sheer self-interest and not on the beloved’s interest and gives only so long as it gets; because, not seldom, the greater the ardour with which it begins, the greater the antipathy with which it ends; and because it frequently mistakes the goading of animal glands for the awakening of human affection. >

>True love does not change or falter because the beloved has changed and faltered or because the physical circumstances wherein it was born have become different. It cannot be blown hither and thither by the accidents of destiny.

Meaning of Realization, Enlightenment, and Liberation

Within spiritual literature, these three terms reference the definitive, ultimate state achieved at the end of “the Quest.” They point to identical underlying realities, bridging Western descriptors with traditional Eastern Sanskrit terms:

Western Descriptors:

- **Realization:** Directly “making real” the presence of the Overself within human awareness.
- **Illumination:** A permanent condition where the light and fullness of the Overself shine uninterruptedly.
- **Liberation:** Freeing the consciousness from the tyranny of the ego, which is transformed into a peaceful servant to the uninterrupted presence of the Overself.

Eastern Descriptors:

- **Mukti / Moksha:** Synonymous Sanskrit terms meaning the liberation, salvation, or emancipation of the soul from the binding cycles of Karma and Samsara.
 - **Jnana:** Pure spiritual “Knowledge” or ultimate “Wisdom.”
 - **Sahaja:** The continuous, unbroken realization that the individual, in essence, always was, is, and shall remain the Overself. Here, the ego is rooted out once and for all and cannot reappear.
 - **Nirvana:** The Buddhist designation for the state of permanent, unshakeable enlightenment.
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“Non-Duality” vs. “Ultimate Reality” (or “Ultimate Truth”)

These terms describe the exact same underlying truth: Ultimate Reality is inherently Non-Dual. Popularized extensively on the internet via the Hindu philosophy of *Advaita* (literally translating to “not two”), the term non-duality is simply another name for Ultimate Reality.

Linguistic concepts help structure our view of human evolution, even though any multiplicity of names is ultimately an illusion. At the highest level, everything is One-Without-Second. However, utilizing the phrase “Ultimate Reality” gives a more definitive, categorical weight:

- **Reality (“The Real”):** Stands in direct opposition to the relative, transitory, or illusory (*Maya*).
- **Ultimate:** Signals a definitive, final, and absolute truth, as opposed to the ephemeral phases of changing life.

As Brunton summarizes:

The exterior reality being “Maya”, our universe becomes both an enigma and a paradox until nonduality is accepted as the final and only solution.

c) Website Reference Index

To facilitate a thorough study of Paul Brunton’s terminology and other key concepts in spiritual philosophy, their exact locations within the sections and documents of our website (web-ur.com) are listed below:

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