

A Yoga Teacher's Guide to Sanskrit

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आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः (ऋग्वेदः १-८९-१)
ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo kṣyantū viśvato (1.89.1 Rig veda)
Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.

Recommended Resources:

- Books
 - *The Language of Yoga: Complete A to Y Guide to Asana Names, Sanskrit Terms, and Chants*, by Nicolai Bachman
 - *A Sanskrit Dictionary: A concise sanskrit dictionary of words from principal traditional scriptures, major philosophical works...* by John M Denton
- Websites/Apps
 - Greenmesg.org
 - Pocketyoga.com/pose/
 - Sanskritsounds.com
 - Spokensanskrit.org
 - Yogastudies.org
 - Yoga 108

saṃskṛta (sanskrit) - refined, adorned, ornamented, polished, highly elaborated

Introduction

Sanskrit is one of the oldest known languages and continues to be of major interest to religious scholars, linguists, and Eastern philosophers. The body of Sanskrit literature encompasses a rich tradition of poetry and drama as well as scientific, technical, philosophical and religious texts. It continues to be the primary language in many sacred texts from the East, including those from Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

Dating as far back as the second millennium BCE, Sanskrit is the oldest Indo-European language for which substantial written documentation exists. It is believed that all Indo-European languages, including Sanskrit, developed from an original language that has now become forgotten. The similarities between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin all point to this original source, and many modern languages also connect to this lineage. French for example, is a direct descendant of Latin, and about half of English words come from French. The Anglo-Saxon side of English, related to German, is also part of this big Indo-European family.

Over the past two millennia, the popularity of Sanskrit as a spoken language waned as other languages took over. In the 2001 Census of India, only 14,135 Indians reported Sanskrit to be their first language. Nevertheless, it is today one of the 22 languages listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, which mandates the Indian government to develop and continue use of the language.

The compositions of Sanskrit were orally transmitted for much of its early history by methods of memorization of exceptional complexity and fidelity. Some followers of Vedantic philosophy, for example, were required to be able to recite the compendium of the Vedas scripture both backwards and forwards. In modern times, it continues to be widely used as a ceremonial language in Hindu religious rituals and Buddhist practices in the form of hymns and chants.

Part I: Understanding Sanskrit and basic vocabulary

While it may seem complicated at first, learning Sanskrit is relatively easier than learning many other languages, because it is a *phonetic language*. Unlike in English, where the same letters can be pronounced very differently depending on surrounding letters and convention--like the 'gh' in *tough* vs. *weigh*, the letter 'c' in *cent* vs. *can't*, or the letters 'tio' in *emotion*--every Sanskrit letter is read and pronounced exactly as it is written.

It may help to think of long Sanskrit words as like strings of pearls. Urdhva Mukha Paschimottanasana has 5 words in it; Urdhva (upward); Mukha (face); Paschima (West or backside of the body); Uttana (intense); Asana (pose).

Learning to identify the smaller words within the long name makes it easier not only to recognize but also to start to pronounce. Once each word is decoded, their meaning can be elucidated. The following pages list the most commonly used words in common yoga poses.

Learn the names of asanas

Descriptions:

1. Adho: downward
2. Ananda: bliss/blissful
3. Ardha: half
4. Baddha: tied/bound
5. Kona: angle
6. Niralamba: without support
7. Parivrtta: revolved
8. Pida: pressure
9. Prasarita: spread out
10. Raja: royal/king
11. Salamba: with support
12. Sthiti: stability
13. Supta: reclining/sleeping
14. Upavistha: seated
15. Urdhva: raised/upward
16. Utkata : powerful, fierce
17. Uttana: intense stretch
18. Utthita: extended, stretched

Body parts:

1. Anga: limb
2. Anghusta: big toe
3. Anguli: fingers
4. Bhuja: arm
5. Hasta: hand
6. Janu: knee
7. Jattara: stomach
8. Karna: ear
9. Mukha: face

10. Pada: foot/ leg
11. Parshva: side
12. Paschima: west direction (back side of body)
13. Prana: breath/ lifeforce
14. Purva: east direction (front side of body)
15. Shirsha: head
16. Sukha: easy

Humanity:

1. Shava: corpse
2. Bala: child
3. Namaskar: I bow to you in respect
4. Sarvanga: whole body
5. Vira: hero/warrior

Animals:

1. Ashva: horse
2. Kaka: crow
3. Baka: crane
4. Bidal/marjara: cow/cat
5. Bheka: frog
6. Bhujanga: snake/ serpent
7. Go: cow
8. Kapota: pigeon/ dove
9. Kukkuta: rooster
10. Kurma: turtle
11. Matsya: fish
12. Mayura: peacock
13. Shalabha: locust/ grasshopper
14. Shvana: dog
15. Ushtra: camel

Things:

1. Bandha: lock
2. Chandra: moon
3. Danda: rod/staff
4. Dhanu: bow
5. Hala: plough
6. Mala: garland, necklace

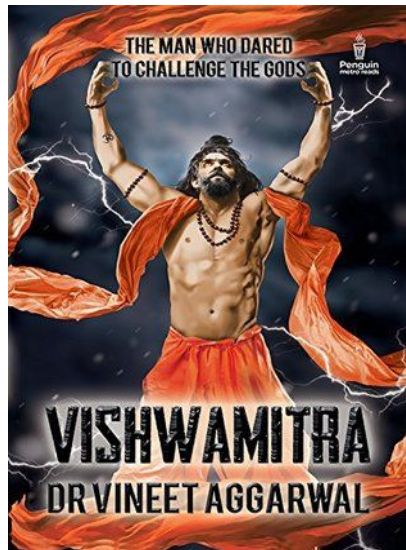
7. Mudra: seal
8. Nava: boat
9. Padma: lotus
10. Parigha: gate latch
11. Pincha: feather
12. Setu: bridge
13. Tada: mountain
14. Tola: scales
15. Vrksha: tree

Numbers:

1. Eka: one
2. Dwi: two, both
3. Tri: three
4. Chatur: four
5. Ashta: eight

Sages and Deities:

1. **Anjana:** mother of Hanuman
2. **Bharadva:** a sage; also the father of famous archer, Drona, who trained the cousins who would later become rivals and fight the famous war that the Bhagavad-Gita was written about.
3. **Garuda:** the king of the eagles; Garuda once provided transportation and carried Lord Vishnu to the aid of devotee, Gajendra who was in a life threatening situation.
4. **Hanuman:** chief of the monkey army; one of Rama's greatest devotees who came to his aid. Hanuman made huge leaps across the sea, first to find Sita and then to save Rama's brother.
5. **Koundinya:** a royal court scholar who predicted the newborn prince, Siddhartha Gautama, would leave his father's kingdom and become the Enlightened One, the Buddha.
6. **Marichi:** son of Brahma and grandfather of Surya the sun god.
7. **Matsyendra:** Lord of the Fishes; Shiva discovered a fish, who had completely learned his teachings of yoga. Shiva gave him divine form to then spread the knowledge of yoga.
8. **Nataraja:** one of the names of Shiva, the lord of the dance.
9. **Surya:** Sun god
10. **Virabhadra:** the great warrior who sprang to Shiva's aid to seek revenge on his father-in-law.
11. **Visvamitra:** A Great king, who, after attempting to steal a sage's cow, went on the yogic path and after getting setback many times, finally attained sagehood.



Test your knowledge

1. prasarita padottanasana = _____
2. salamba sarvangasana = _____
3. supta baddha konasana = _____
4. janu sirsasana = _____
5. chaturanga dandasana = _____
6. surya namaskar = _____
7. trikonasana = _____
8. setu bandha sarvangasana = _____
9. parivrtta utkatasana = _____
10. eka pada kakasana = _____
11. salamba bhujangasana = _____
12. parshva virabhadrasana = _____
13. ardha navasana = _____
14. ananda balasana = _____
15. utthita supta virasana = _____
16. hanumanasana = _____
17. adho mukha svanasana = _____
18. utthita hasta padangusthasana = _____
19. pincha mayurasana = _____
20. karnapidasana = _____
21. dwi pada kapotasana = _____

Challenges

1. Instruct Sun Salutation A and B entirely in sanskrit

Example: Sun Salutation A

<u>Breath</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Sanskrit</u>
Inhale	Mountain Pose	
Exhale	Standing at Attention	
Inhale	Extended Mountain	
Exhale	Forward Fold	
Inhale	Half Lift	
Exhale	Low Plank	
Inhale	Upward Facing Dog	
Exhale	Downward Facing Dog	
Inhale	Half Lift	
Exhale	Forward Fold	
Inhale	Extended Mountain	
Exhale	Standing at Attention	

2. Instruct—or be instructed by—a unique yoga sequence entirely in sanskrit
3. Give **three examples** of how knowing the sanskrit name of the pose can help one understand the nature and qualities of the pose.

What about plank pose?

There is not a common sanskrit word for plank pose. Some options are:

1. Utthita chaturanga dandasana: _____
2. Kumbhakasana: _____
3. Phalakasana: _____

Part II: Proper pronunciation, understanding transliteration, and diacritical marks

Learning sanskrit is more than simply memorizing a vocabulary of words. We have to learn a whole new lettering system too. When the 44 (some scholars say up to 49) letters of sanskrit are translated (also known as known as transliteration) to the 26 romanized letters in the English language, much gets lost in the way of correct pronunciation.

For example, we often see how one sanskrit character is transliterated into a “dh”, like in dharma, Buddha and Gandhi. The added ‘h’ implies the ‘d’ should be *aspirated*: said with a pushing out of the breath. The same goes for the ‘b’ in the name of the great sage, Amitabha.

Sanskrit's breadth of expression comes in part from using the entire mouth for pronunciation and from elongating vowels. It has several different versions of familiar sounds such as ‘n’ and ‘s’, each issuing from a different part of the mouth. For this reason, what are known as *diacritical marks*, symbols above or below the letter, are generally used to indicate how and where a consonant or vowel should sound, making up what is known as the *International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration*.

Many sanskrit mantras and texts are considered sacred, and some are even considered to have special mystical and magical powers. Thus the proper pronunciation of these words are critically important.

Examples

Upaniṣad - the dot under the second *s* means a “sh” sound, which is why you’ll commonly see this word translated to *Upanishad*. This *s* however is pronounced like it is in the word *schnapps*. It is known as a “cerebral” consonant, and along with the letters *ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh* and *ṇ*, it is pronounced with the tongue touching the roof of the mouth.

Gaṇeśa - the accent over this *s* also indicates a “sh” sound, but it is pronounced closer to the front of the mouth, like in the word *shut* or *shout*.

Pārśva Vīrabhadrāsana - For side warrior, we see the same *s* as in Ganesha, however we also see lines over the vowels. This means we hold the vowel for longer.

Śīrṣāsana - Now we have three different *s*'s, as well as lines over the vowels that are meant to be lengthened. The next pages cover proper pronunciation of all the sanskrit letters.

Hasta Pādāṅguṣṭhāsana - now we see a dot above an 'n' as well as under a 't'. If the dot is over, it implies a more guttural (towards the throat) pronunciation, while under implies a cerebral (towards the middle/top of the the mouth) pronunciation.

Now, with this knowledge, let us chant the student teacher prayer:

saha nāvavatu | Together may we be protected

saha nau bhunaktu | Together may we enjoy our studies

saha vīryaṃ karavāvahai | Together may we work vigorously

tejasvi nāvadhītamastu | Let our study together be fiery (to illuminate)

mā vidviṣāvahai | And (because of this) may we not hate (each other).

om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ | om peace peace peace

Sanskrit Pronunciation Key

14 Vowels (some have 2 forms)

अ	a	another	ऋ / ॠ	r̄	trill for 2 beats
आ / ऀ	ā	f <u>ath</u> er (2 beats)	ॠ / ॡ	l̄	table
इ / ि	i	pin	ॠ / ॡ	ī	trill for 2 beats
ई / ी	ī	ne <u>ed</u> (2 beats)	ए / ै	e	et <u>ud</u> e (2 beats)
उ / ु	u	fl <u>ut</u> e	ऐ / ौ	ai	ai <u>sl</u> e (2 beats)
ऊ / ू	ū	mo <u>od</u> (2 beats)	ओ / ो	o	yo <u>ok</u> e (2 beats)
ऋ / ॠ	r̄	mac <u>ab</u> re	औ / ौ	au	fl <u>aut</u> ist (2 beats)

Two Special Letters

अं	am	h <u>um</u>	अः	aḥ	out-breath
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33 Consonants

क	ka	pap <u>ri</u> ka	थ	tha	eat h <u>on</u> ey
ख	kha	th <u>ick</u> h <u>on</u> ey	द	da	soda
ग	ga	sag <u>a</u>	ध	dha	good h <u>on</u> ey
घ	gha	big h <u>on</u> ey	न	na	ban <u>an</u> a
ङ	ṅa	in <u>k</u>	प	pa	pat <u>er</u> nal
च	ca	ch <u>ut</u> ney	फ	pha	scoop h <u>on</u> ey
छ	cha	mu <u>ch</u> h <u>on</u> ey	ब	ba	scub <u>a</u>
ज	ja	Jap <u>a</u> n	भ	bha	rub h <u>on</u> ey
झ	jha	raj h <u>on</u> ey	म	ma	arom <u>a</u>
ञ	ña	in <u>ch</u>	य	ya	employ <u>ab</u> le
ट	ṭa	bors <u>ch</u> t ag <u>a</u> in	र	ra	abr <u>a</u> cad <u>ab</u> ra
ठ	ṭha	bors <u>ch</u> t h <u>on</u> ey	ल	la	hu <u>l</u> a
ड	ḍa	sh <u>ḍ</u> um	व	va	var <u>i</u> ety
ढ	ḍha	sh <u>ḍ</u> h <u>um</u>	श	śa	sh <u>u</u> t
ण	ṇa	sh <u>ṇ</u> um	ष	ṣa	sh <u>ṇ</u> apps
त	ta	past <u>a</u>	स	sa	L <u>i</u> sa
			ह	ha	h <u>on</u> ey

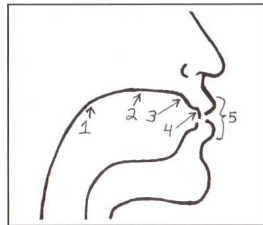
Sanskrit

Alphabet with English Transliteration

अ	आ	इ	ई	उ	ऊ	
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	
		ए	ऐ	ओ	औ	
		e	ai	o	au	
ऋ	ॠ	ऌ		ॡ		अः
ṛ	ṙ	ḷ		᳚		aḥ
क	ख	ग	घ	ङ		Guttural
ka	kha	ga	gha	ṅa		
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ		Palatal
ca	cha	ja	jha	ña		
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण		Cerebral
ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa		
त	थ	द	ध	न		Dental
ta	tha	da	dha	na		
प	फ	ब	भ	म		Labial
pa	pha	ba	bha	ma		
य	र	ल	व			
ya	ra	la	va			
श	ष	स	ह	क्ष	ज्ञ	
śa	ṣa	sa	ha	kṣa	jña	

MOUTH POSITIONS

	Part of Tongue Used
1	Guttural (or Velar) (back of throat)..... Back
2	Palatal (beginning of hard palate)..... Top
3	Cerebral (or Lingual or Retroflex) (upper front pocket of hard palate)..... Tip
4	Dental (behind teeth)..... Tip
5	Labial (at the lips)..... Not used



<i>a</i>	pronounced like 'a' in <i>america</i>
<i>ā</i>	pronounced like 'a' in <i>barn</i>
<i>i</i>	pronounced like 'i' in <i>bit</i>
<i>ī</i>	pronounced like 'i' in <i>liter</i>
<i>u</i>	pronounced like 'u' in <i>put</i>
<i>ū</i>	pronounced like 'u' in <i>dude</i>
<i>e</i>	pronounced like 'e' in <i>grey</i>
<i>ai, ay</i>	pronounced like 'ai' in <i>aisle</i>
<i>o</i>	pronounced like 'o' in <i>over</i>
<i>au</i>	pronounced like 'ow' in <i>cow</i>
<i>k, kh, g, gh, ṅ</i>	<i>gutturals</i> , arising from the throat
<i>c, ch, j, jh, ñ</i>	<i>palatals</i> , arising from the back of the palate
<i>ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ</i>	<i>cerebrals</i> , with tongue touching the roof of the mouth
<i>t th d dh n</i>	<i>dentals</i> , with tongue touching the back of the teeth
<i>p ph b bh m</i>	<i>labials</i> , arising from the lips
<i>c, ch</i>	<i>Palatal</i> , always pronounced like 'ch' in <i>chop</i>
<i>ṛ</i>	<i>Cerebral</i> , pronounced 'ri' in <i>rip</i>
<i>ś</i>	<i>Palatal</i> , pronounced like 'sh' in <i>shout</i>
<i>ṣ</i>	<i>Cerebral</i> , pronounced like 'sh' in <i>leash</i>
<i>ñ</i>	Pronounced like 'ni' in <i>onion</i>
<i>ṃ</i>	pronounced like 'n' in <i>uncle</i>
<i>ṅ</i>	pronounced like 'gn' in <i>igneous</i>
<i>h alone</i>	pronounced like 'h' in <i>hot</i>
<i>ḥ</i>	a soft echo of the preceding vowel
<i>h after a consonant</i>	extra breath after the consonant

Common sanskrit phrases and chants

Pavamana mantra

Asato mā sad gamaya | *From the unreal lead me to the real,*
Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya | *From the darkness lead me to the light,*
Mrtyor māmṛtaṃ gamaya | *From death lead me to the immortality*

Mahamrityumjaya Mantra

Om tryambakam yajāmahe | We worship the three-eyed one who sustains all living beings.
sugandhim puṣṭivardhanam | May he liberate us from (Samsara) death.
urvā rukamiva bandhanān | May he (Lord Shiva) lead us to immortality,
mṛtyor muḁṣīya mā'mṛtāt | just as the cucumber is released from its bondage.

Lokah Samasta

Lokāḥ Samastāḥ Sukhino Bhavantu | May all beings in the world be happy and free.

Ganesha Chant

Jai Ganesha Deva, Jai Durga Ma
Uma Parvati, Ananda Ma
Hari Om Namah Shivaya
Om Namah Shivaya, Mahadeva Shambo

The Adi Mantra

Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō (4x)
Guru Dev Guru Dev Namō
Guru Dev Guru Dev Namō

Jai Mata Kali

Jai Mata Kali Jai Mata Durga (2x)
Kali Durga Namō Namah
Kali Durga Namō Namah
Kali Durga Namō Namah

Govinda Gopala

Govinda Gopala, Radha Ramana Hari
Govinda Jaya Jaya Ishvara