

Sanskrit and Yoga for Yoga Therapists

We have approached a point where standards for Yoga therapists are being addressed for our field, by those in our field. I would like to weigh in on why it is important for a Yoga therapist to be familiar with some Sanskrit, the language of Yoga, and how this can benefit a Yoga therapist in practice.

Every profession has its own language. It is important as a professional, especially when a foreign language is involved, to pronounce the terminology properly and truly understand what each term means. Many Sanskrit words, including *shakti*, *prana*, *Yoga*, *cakra*, *kundalini*, *Ayurveda*, and even some *mantra-s*, are part of the vocabulary of Yoga practitioners and therapists. How can we call ourselves Yoga therapists without some basic knowledge of Yoga's language?

Sanskrit, the language of Yoga and Ayurveda, applies to Yoga therapy in many ways. First, by understanding certain Sanskrit concepts important to the philosophy of Yoga and Ayurveda (called "*Sankhya*"), one gains a greater awareness of what the originators of Yoga really meant, hence a greater awareness of the potential of Yoga for healing and of the power inherent in Sanskrit words. For example, the qualities of nature, called "*gunas*," are *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. These are vital to understanding the manifest world around us according to the Yogic perspective, where we are in it, and how best to move toward a happier and healthier situation. Both Yoga and Ayurveda emphasize the refinement of the body, breath, and consciousness toward a state of *sattva*, which is related to the word for truth, *sat*. Both systems encourage the cultivation of *sattva*, as should any Yoga therapist, to gear the client toward its qualities of goodness, clarity, truth, openness, and light.

Calling oneself a Yoga therapist implies that we are offering therapeutic services according to Yoga. That begs the question, "What is Yoga?" Yoga is a philosophy and a way of life; however, the connotation of the word "Yoga" has become distorted as Yoga has grown and spread into the mainstream of Western society. Being one of the six "*views*" (*shad-darshana-s*) deriving from the *Veda-s*, Yoga includes both theoretical philosophy (*Sankhya*) and practices (*sadhana-s*). The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali actually describe

four different aspects of Yoga. The state or process of Yoga and its primary definition is "*citta-vrtti-nirodha*" (sutra 1.2). This aspect of Yoga involves stilling and calming the fluctuations in the heart-mind (*citta*). Kriya-Yoga, another aspect of Yoga, is defined in sutra 2.1 as the last three *niyama-s*—a powerful triad of practices that produce real mental-emotional change and growth. Ashtanga-Yoga, discussed in sutra 2.29, consists of the eight limbs, of which *asana* is one. The final and most subtle Yoga could be called "*samyama-*

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Yoga," the process of turning inward toward a state of quiescence. Keep in mind that other texts define Yoga in different yet related ways, always with a sense of equanimity, moderation and inner poise.

A thorough understanding of any system of healing requires some knowledge of the culture it came from. Language reflects what a culture is about. During the last century there has been a growing cultural exchange between East and West.

While India has assimilated many aspects of Western culture, our culture has embraced the Yoga and meditation teachings of India. Certain Sanskrit words like *guru* or *mantra* are now part of our language, especially now that Yoga is so popular in the West. Since our society associates Yoga with health and meditation, and Sanskrit is the language of Yoga, it has even become commonplace to use Sanskrit words for marketing health. Sanskrit words are now connected with the mainstream concept of Yoga in general, witnessed by the number of Sanskrit words printed on items such as baby clothing, necklaces, and even license plates. Many retail companies have adopted Sanskrit names, which are a kind of code implying that they have a relationship to Yoga. Obviously the general public intuitively understands that Sanskrit is the language of the Yoga culture. There should be no question as to whether Sanskrit should be the language a Yoga therapist studies and uses as a part of the very foundation of their healing art.

In Yoga therapy as we are beginning to see it defined in the west, this means interfacing with health care professionals who have

been trained bio-medically. The medical system of Yoga, Ayurveda, is as old as Yoga and is more specifically the system of maintaining good health and preventing disease through diet and lifestyle appropriate to our own specific body type. Disease prevention includes diet and nutrition therapy along with lifestyle counseling. Ayurvedic treatment combines herbal medicine with therapies involving cleansing and rejuvenation. Of course *asana* therapy can be used for both prevention and treatment. The private appli-

cation of Yoga therapy, as opposed to physical therapy or *asana* therapy, needs to include some use of Ayurveda.

Communicating between two quite different systems of medicine involves at least a basic understanding of how each views the physical body and of each system's medical terminology. Just as Western medical vocabulary is based on Latin words, Eastern medical (Ayurvedic) vocabulary is based on Sanskrit words. The study of Western anatomy and physiology usually includes learning certain basic Latin roots and words so a doctor or practitioner can understand what a term means simply by its spelling. For example, "endometriosis" comes from "endo," meaning "inside/within," "metr," meaning "uterus," and the suffix "osis," meaning "condition/abnormal increase." The entire word literally means "an excess condition inside the uterus." The term "anorexia" comes from "an," meaning "not," and "orexis," meaning "appetite." In the same way, understanding the components of certain Sanskrit terms can enlighten our understanding of them. For example, what is called Parkinson's disease in the West is known as "*kampavata*" in Ayurveda, which literally means, "shaking *vata*." A term for "indigestion" is "*ajirna*," meaning "not broken down." The Sanskrit term for anorexia (see above for the Latin derivation) is "*aroka-ka*," which is similar to Latin: "a" meaning "not" and "roca" meaning "hunger."

One of the most important uses of Sanskrit by a Yoga therapist is through the science of *mantra*. Chanting specific sounds directed to certain parts of the body or to the

cakra-s can loosen and open up that area, promoting pliability and relaxation. Many Yoga practitioners already have this realization on some level, which is one of the reasons for the popularity of Sanskrit words. These people are not “airy fairy” or “new age” (although certainly there are some), but people who at some level are seeking wellness. Frequently on the sound level of Sanskrit words, Yoga students become familiar with popular kirtan artists’ work. It is not a huge leap for the public; it should not be a huge leap for Yoga therapy as it emerges as an alternative therapy in this society. This is a good thing for Yoga therapy; it shows us that retaining our roots in traditional Yoga is already accepted by just as many people as who are ready and that number multiplies when people are in physical, mental, or emotional pain.

Mantra has the power to focus and calm our busy minds, reduce stress, and promote well-being. As Yoga therapists often working with people in distress, we are obligated to understand that the proper pronunciation of *mantra-s* is crucial to produce the intended effect. When intention and sound are both going in the same direction, the likelihood that the desired result will occur is maximized. If the *mantra* is mispronounced, unpredictable effects may ensue. Repetition strengthens the effects of a *mantra*. For example, the *mantra* “yam” (pronounced “yum”) is the single most powerful sound for the heart *cakra*. Its effect is to open the heart and chest, release trapped emotions, and invigorate the heart and lungs.

Often when Yoga therapists are communicating with each other, certain Sanskrit terms may be important to use in conversation instead of speaking with English words, which are more often than not inaccurate and clunky. On more than one occasion I have conversed with others using English words and literally did not know what they were referring to. For example, the word “mind” can have several different connotations. In Sanskrit, the word “*citta*” actually refers to the heart-mind complex, and often the word “*manas*” means specifically the outer mind responsible for sensory processing, both input and output. The “*buddhi*” is the inner mind responsible for determining what is true and deciding on a course of action. Let’s not forget the *ahankara* or “ego” that keeps us intact as an individual body-mind complex while at the same time

attempting to subjugate the *buddhi* through the affliction called “*asmita*,” meaning “I-am-ness.”

One word that is quite common in Yoga circles is “*hatha*,” usually pronounced incorrectly using the English “th” phoneme. *Hatha* Yoga is defined thoroughly in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, wherein much more is referred to than physical postures. This text discusses cleansing techniques, *asana*, *yama-s* (10), *niyama-s* (10), *pranayama*, *mudra*, and more. The primary goal of *hatha* Yoga is absolute purification of the body, breath, and mind, and striking a balance between the solar and lunar energy channels (*nadi-s*) in the subtle body.

Sanskrit is considered a natural language whose sounds are said to represent the subtle essence of their meaning, as in the sound “ga,” which literally represents the action of going or movement. Mispronuncia-

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tion of Sanskrit words throws off this natural alignment. For example, the word “*mala*” pronounced as “muh-luh” means and represents “impurity,” whereas the sound “*maalaa*” means “a rosary, garland.” This natural affinity between sound and meaning may be one reason why Sanskrit is considered divine in Indian tradition.

Because it is 100% phonetic, Sanskrit pronunciation is extremely easy to learn. It is not necessary to read the original script, called Devanagari. The romanized form of Sanskrit, called transliteration, uses English letters with occasional marks (diacritics) above or below certain letters. This form allows us to pronounce Sanskrit words properly by reading letters already familiar to us. Of course we need to know how the diacritical marks change the pronunciation of the letters they are with and have access to the correct spelling of each word.

As standards for Yoga therapy are being developed, it would do well to require basic pronunciation of Sanskrit, meanings of *asana* names, and a thorough understanding of terms important to Yoga therapy. As Yoga therapists this is our language; how else are we to communicate “in Yoga” without it? Learning the basics of Sanskrit does not take

much effort. Studying and experiencing Yoga as a multidimensional set of tools and practices requires much more time and discipline. If we label ourselves as Yoga therapists, it would be wise to ensure we have a solid understanding of most, if not all, aspects of Yoga, including its language.

In my opinion, a well-rounded Yoga therapy program should include

- Some knowledge of the history and origins of Yoga
- Basic knowledge of Sankhya philosophy, which underlies Yoga and Ayurveda
- A fundamental understanding of what Yoga really is, according to the Yoga Sutras
- Personal experience practicing and integrating all eight limbs of Yoga, including *kriya-Yoga*
- Basic understanding of Ayurvedic principles, including its perspective on anatomy and physiology, in the physical and subtle bodies
- Basic Sanskrit pronunciation and meaning of *asana* names, some concepts from the Yoga Sutras, and important Ayurvedic terms

Remember that the true focus of Yoga is to remove obstructions in our physical and subtle body, clear away distractions in our heart-mind, and allow our pure, inner light of awareness to shine through and illuminate those around us. **YTT**

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