

# Sanskrit Mantra-s

by Nicolai Bachman

Mantra, like Yoga and Ayurveda, is both a science and a practice. Mantra is the science of sound and vibration, primarily repeating a sound or verse audibly or inaudibly over a long period of time. A mantra is also the sound itself. Each mantra, depending on its length, has specific or general effects on oneself, others, and the world. Choosing a mantra wisely and pronouncing it properly are both very important factors in causing the desired effect. Mantra purifies the mind, just as āsana purifies the body and prāṇāyāma the breath. Sanskrit originated as the language of mantra and is perfectly designed for such purposes. The vast knowledge and wisdom that comes from ancient India was originally expressed in the Sanskrit language.

Mantra is a Sanskrit word deriving from the root “man” meaning “to think, believe, suppose or imagine” and from which the word “manas” meaning “mind” is created. In this context, mind implies “citta” which includes both the outer mind that processes sensory perceptions, the inner mind that makes decisions based on the information provided by the outer mind, as well as one’s memories and impressions accumulated during this lifetime and previous lifetimes.

The “tra” suffix can be interpreted in many ways. First, “tra” can mean “that which protects.” One definition of mantra is “Mananāt trāyate iti mantrah” which means “Mantra is that which protects from thinking.” In other words, when we are mentally reciting a mantra, and focused only on it, then all of the thoughts and emotions that we are normally caught up in cannot distract us. The mantra protects us from them. Another meaning of “tra” is “tool or instrument” and mantra is also method or way of focusing the mind on one thing. A third possibility for “tra” is “crossing over” from the Sanskrit root tṛ. Mantra can help our individual consciousness transcend and connect to the universal light of awareness.

Mantra-s can be external or internal, and are supposed to be used to help, not hurt. A spiritual mantra, given as part of an initiation, is always internal because it and connects us to our guru and his/her lineage. Depending on the teacher, a potential disciple might have to demonstrate their readiness to handle being in the lineage. Once accepted, the devotee is given a mantra, which binds him/her to the teacher like a son to a father. The teacher assumes the responsibility of the student’s karma, and the student promises to repeat the mantra as much as possible for the rest of his/her life.

A “nāma” (meaning “name”) mantra is one to a specific deity’s name, usually one of the Hindu pantheon. A very common example is “Om namaḥ Śivaya” meaning “Salutations to Shiva.” According to the Yoga Sūtra-s, svādhyāya, which includes recitation of a mantra, links us to our “iṣṭa-devatā” or “chosen deity” such as Gaṇeśa, Śiva, or any deity you like. This deity represents the “one” and is our chosen way of relating to the divine inner Self, and so this mantra is also internal. The Sanskrit word for deity is “deva,” whose root is “div,” from which the English word “divine” comes. Repeating the nāma mantra brings the deity into our presence and consciousness, so we can connect fully to That which all of us house in our heart. Kirtana (Hindi kirtan) is a very popular practice of chanting divine names in a group setting with musical accompaniment.

Bīja (“seed”) mantra-s are single-syllable sounds that project very specific effects, like laser-beams of sound. Effects include clearing, detoxification, abundance, transformation, destruction, etc. These can be used externally like a prayer, wishing for something, although one is supposed to accept the results that transpire without becoming upset if they are not what was expected. Bīja mantra-s can also be applied internally to facilitate a connection with our inner Self.

Most bīja mantra-s are composed of several individual phonemes that combine to create an effect. Most end in the anusvāra or nasal sound, which can be pronounced at the lips or in the throat, and serves to resonate the sounds before it. For example, śrīm is a mantra related to Lakṣmī, whose effect is to bring wealth and

prosperity. [Note that both ś and ṣ are pronounced as “sh”.] The first sound is “ś” – a sound calms and quiets. Next is “r” which is a masculine, heating sound, followed by “ṛ” which is a feminine, cooling sound. The three sounds pronounced together have the synergistic effect of magnificence/splendor/prosperity. Bīja mantra-s can be enhanced with a “yantra,” a visual representation of the mantra that is often a geometric pattern.

Some verses are also considered mantra, such as the Gāyatrī mantra to the sun from the Ṛg-Veda, the oldest and most important source of knowledge from ancient India. When reciting this in the original Vedic way, according to the tones marked in the original Sanskrit script, we tap into a tremendously powerful energy, a pattern of sound that has been repeated billions upon billions of times over thousands of years. This mantra is religiously chanted many times every sunrise and sunset by millions of Hindus all over India. It is 24 syllables long and is regarded as the most sacred Vedic mantra.

Sanskrit is the language of mantra, and the sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet are intimately connected with nature. The sound of a Sanskrit word is said to carry its meaning(s). The sound of a Sanskrit seed mantra, a single-syllable phoneme, carries its effect. Sound and meaning/effect are inseparable. For example, the sound of the word “dāna” expresses its meaning of “donation,” even if the listener does not know it. Mispronouncing a word can throw off the relationship between sound and meaning, even so far as causing a different meaning to be carried along. For example, the prefixes “a” (short, single-beat sound) and “ā” (long, double-beat sound) respectively negate the word and enhance it. The word “nanda” means “happiness.” “Ananda” means “unhappiness,” while “ānanda” means “extreme happiness or bliss.” If we pronounce the “ā” as “a” in this word, then you are expressing the energy of unhappiness, instead of your intended meaning of “bliss.”

It doesn't take that much effort to learn the basics of Sanskrit pronunciation. It is completely phonetic, so there are no silent letters and you always pronounce each letter the same way. Learning to read the script is the best, but that takes a significant investment of time. It is easiest to learn what is called “transliteration” – the Sanskrit sounds written in letters we are familiar with, like a,b,c,d etc. Other than a few little diacritical marks here and there, many of the sounds are the same as English and even closer to Spanish.

To maximize the effect of a mantra, it is best if the sound is correct and aligns with the intention of the reciter. Accurate pronunciation of Sanskrit is very important, especially when it comes to mantra, since a mantra is said to require at least one hundred thousand repetitions (called “japa”) before it becomes potentized. After this, some subtle effects of the mantra may be noticed, and the effects strengthen with each additional ten thousand repetitions. Can you imagine repeating “ananda” meaning “unhappiness” (see previous paragraph) that many times without realizing it?

First we learn how to pronounce the mantra correctly. An audio recording played over and over again is the best way to learn it. We listen and repeat the mantra out loud until it becomes completely memorized and integrated into our human system. Cycling the mantra over and over in our mind serves to repattern our consciousness toward the energy of the mantra. If repeating a spiritual mantra, it links us to our guru and our inner Self, considered the same.

Why is it important to call the yoga postures by their Sanskrit names? First, all the postures, called “āsana-s,” were originally named in Sanskrit, and these names provide a standard nomenclature that is recognized worldwide. When yoga teachers make up their own posture names, it undercuts the accepted standard of Sanskrit, and contributes to a hodge-podge of names that may not be recognized at other yoga studios. This can lead to the same posture being called several different names, or several postures being called the same name. Another reason to use the Sanskrit āsana names is that they link us to the very culture from which they came. Many postures are named after characters or deities with important stories behind them. Even the sound of the āsana name in Sanskrit brings in the characteristic vibration of this divine and perfected language that is at the foundation of Indian sciences and religions. Pronouncing the āsana names properly allows us to experience their vibration on a subtle level, and feel their unique rhythm. I developed The Language of Yoga, a book with two

audio CDs, specifically to provide a written and auditory reference guide for pronouncing chants, vocabulary, and āsana names.

Yoga (the science of consciousness), Ayurveda (the science of medicine and longevity), Jyotisha (science of astrology), and Mantra (the science of sound), among many others, all share their roots in Vedic ideas and philosophy. These sciences overlap significantly, all part of the same Vedic web. The Sanskrit language, in which the Veda-s were “heard” and eventually written, contains words for concepts unique to that culture. Trying to use English words for Sanskrit concepts often narrows their meanings significantly and leads to misunderstandings. Many Sanskrit terms have no English equivalents, and in fact require a context, a commentary, and often direct experience before they can be fully understood.

Mantra is an ancient and powerful way to cleanse our consciousness and connect with the divine in us all. All paths of yoga use mantra-s to varying degrees, and it has been a part of yogic practices from the dawn of civilization. A mantra provides an object of meditation for practicing the inner limbs of yoga, helps us maintain a focused heart-mind, and protects us from outer distractions as we journey inward toward self-knowledge.

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Note: If you want to hear certain mantra-s pronounced, there are several available as free audio downloads from my website. I also sell 8 different Sanskrit Chant Packs (downloadable albums with PDF text) that are professionally recorded and teach the listener how to recite various chants.