

Why is Pronunciation so Important in Sanskrit?

The Vedas have been chanted in Sanskrit for over 4,000 years. The word Sanskrit, means 'perfected' or 'refined'. Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages in the world. Sanskrit is said to have a sacred origin.

Sanskrit is the origin of most modern North Indian Languages. Many European languages came from an earlier Indo-European language that is thought to be similar to Sanskrit.

Sanskrit is normally written in the Devanagari script. Devanagari means 'the alphabet of the gods'. Devanagari is a phonetic alphabet that consists of 13 vowels (svara) and 34 consonants (vyanjana). It is known as a 'syllabic script' - every letter has a unique sound.

In Sanskrit it is important to have the correct diacritical marks above or below certain letters, otherwise there is no way of knowing how to pronounce them. Each sound in the Sanskrit alphabet is made in a specific place in the mouth or throat.

Reading Sanskrit words with no diacritical marks and pronouncing them as English words may lead to the meaning changing. Here are some examples:

1. In Sanskrit the word 'mala' means impurity, urine or sweat, while the word 'mālā' means a necklace of beads, garland or rosary.
2. In Sanskrit the word 'ananda' means unhappiness while the word 'ānanda' means inner happiness or bliss.
3. In Sanskrit the word 'kāma' has to do with the fulfilment of desires in the world while the word 'karma' is the law of action and reaction.

Rhythm is built into the Sanskrit language, each syllable being either short (one beat) or long (two beats). For example, 'guru' is made of 'gu' and 'ru', each a short syllable, so it is two beats long. The word 'āsana' is made of a long 'aa', short 'sa' and short 'na', so it is pronounced 'aasana' and is 2+1+1=4 beats long.

In Sanskrit there are 5 mouth/tongue positions; guttural (back of the throat as in 'kah' or 'gah'), palatal (top of the palate as in 'cha' or 'jha'), cerebral (the smooth, round area of hard palate behind and above the teeth as in 'ta' or 'da'), dental (touching the back of the teeth, as in 'tu' or 'du' or 'n'), and labial (lips, as in 'pah' or 'mah').

Chanting a mantra, especially a single-seed (bija) mantra, creates this vibration in our energy field. For example, the mantra 'Shreem' is the seed sound for the energy of abundance and it invokes the Goddess Lakshmi. Chanting 'Gaṁ' invokes Ganesha 'the remover of obstacles'. The mantra - om̐ gaṁ gaṇapataye namaḥ also invokes Ganesha the elephant God.

Chanting the names of Gods and Goddesses invokes the qualities they represent. Mantras are often combined with yantras (sacred diagrams) and mudras (finger positions). The more the sound, intention, meaning and visualisation align, the more powerful the desired effect will be.

Mantras

The Sanskrit word 'mantra' comes from the root 'manas', means 'to think' or 'mind' and 'tram' which means 'to protect', 'to free', 'to go across'. Thus chanting mantras protect the mind from its self-destructive tendencies. Chanting mantras allows us to experience deeper states of consciousness.

There are two types of mantras; longer chants and shorter seed (bija) mantras. Some bija-mantras use the semi-vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet. The bija mantras for the chakras are formed from the semi-vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet YA, RA, LA, VA. They are called '*antahstha*' or intermediate sounds in Sanskrit.

Vedic Scholar David Frawley says that the vowels are linked to the formless realm while the consonants are linked to the realm of form. He says, "Intermediating between vowels and consonants in their energetic quality, semi-vowels reflect prana or energy that mediates between the formless realm and the realm of form."

Om - Om is said to be the essence of all mantras, the Divine Word or 'Shabda Brahman'. Om is the sound of the infinite. Chanting Om clears the mind for meditation. It gives power to all mantras. Hence most mantras begin or end with Om, and without it mantras are said to be deprived of power.

Om consists of three sounds; the vowel 'a', the vowel 'u' and the nasalised 'm' sound. Hence Om is sometimes written as 'Aum'. The three sounds of 'Aum' relate to the states of waking, dream and deep sleep and to the three gunas of rajas, sattva and tamas. They are ruled by Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the Divine in its threefold role as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the universe.

So'ham - Soham is the natural sound of the breath. 'So' is the inhalation and 'Ham' is the exhalation. If we breathe deeply and listen to the sound of our breath we hear these sounds. In Sanskrit the root 'Sa' from which 'So' comes means to hold, to have power, to be. 'Ham' means to leave, abandon, cast out, to expel or exhale.

The Use of Mantras

Mantras are important tools for calming the mind. Using a mantra helps to break up our subconscious thoughts and desires. These patterns keep us bound to past conditioning.

It is not possible for most of us to silence the mind but it is within our power to chant a mantra. If we do this regularly, it gradually replaces the background noise of the mind. Our subconscious mind is restructured by the energy of the mantra and we find that meditation is easier.

Mantras can be used to clear negative thoughts from the mind. Using the mantra 'Hum', eliminates fear while using the mantra 'Ram' grants peace. Mantra does not require any elaborate psychoanalysis, only an ongoing practice. Through mantra practise we can change the structure of the mind.

Chanting a mantra will eventually lead us to meditation and silence. It is not an end in itself to repeat a mantra. Once the mind is still we can stop repeating the mantra and

dwell in the silence. When the mind resumes its chatter again we go back to repeating the mantra.

Mantra Science

Vedic Scholar David Frawley believes that the human being is a creation of sound. “Mantra repeated mentally cleanses the causal body or samskaric field, so it alters subconscious habits.”

Russill Paul author of ‘The Yoga of Sound’ says, “Yogic mantras stimulate the secretions of the pituitary gland, which is located only millimetres from the palate. These secretions strengthen our immune and neurological systems, protecting us from disease and negative emotions. In various clinical and therapeutic applications, chanting has been found to control the production of stress hormones and increase the production of endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers.”

He says that chanting Sanskrit mantras creates an enormous quantity of energy in the body.

Swami Mayatitananda says that the 72,000 nadis/subtle channels that exist in the body are all sensitive to sound, and function through vibrations. She says that chanting mantras increases the vitality of the nadis. When we chant a mantra the prana that flows through the nadis becomes charged.

She says, “When the pranas are healthy and filled with vitality, they stimulate healthy tissue and organ activity. Vital prana and harmonious sound work together hand in hand. They travel through the mind like a great wave, revitalising the brain cells and inspiring the mind to produce clear, fluent, harmonious thoughts.”

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Kundalini Yoga

In Kundalini Yoga it is said that when we chant, we are stimulating 84 meridian points in the mouth (64 in the hard palate and 20 in the soft palate). Chanting is said to awaken dormant parts of the brain and circulate energy through the body.

Yogi Bhajan says, “the tongue stimulates those meridian points, and they in turn stimulate the hypothalamus which makes the pineal gland radiate. When the pineal gland radiates, it creates an impulse, the entire glandular system secretes and a human being attains bliss.”

According to Dr Khalsa, chanting mantras stimulates the vagus nerve, situated near the jaw, which services the heart, lungs, intestinal tract, and back muscles.

Power of Chanting

Vedic Prayers are always chanted in Sanskrit. Most devotional India chants are sung in the various Indian languages rather than Sanskrit. Although most of the Northern Indian languages have their origin in Sanskrit.

If you would like to learn the Sanskrit Alphabet I have produced a Sanskrit Mantra CD which is available through my website –

<http://www.simonheather.co.uk/pages/cds.php>

References

David Frawley - Inner Tantric Yoga: Working with the Universal Shakti - Inner Lotus Press, September 2008

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Dharma Singh Khalsa and Cameron Stauth - Meditation as Medicine: Activate the Power of Your Natural Healing Force - New York, Warner Books – 2001

Simon Heather

Simon is the founder of the College of Sound Healing. The College of Sound Healing is a non-profit making organisation dedicated to promoting sound healing in the UK. Simon has an extensive background in the healing arts and is a qualified acupuncturist, sound healer and body-worker. He has studied with some of the world's leading spiritual teachers and sound healers.

<http://www.simonheather.co.uk/>

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