

SANSKRIT: ‘PERFECTED’

Whenever you practice or read about Yoga, you’ll inevitably run across Sanskrit. Sanskrit is the classical language of India, much like Latin is the classical language of medieval Europe. Nowadays Sanskrit is pretty much a dead language, and though it’s still one of a dozen or so official languages of India, even in its heyday Sanskrit was spoken only by a relatively small circle of academics and priests.

One tradition holds that Sanskrit evolved over a thousand years out of vernacular or everyday languages, known collectively as the Prakrits. Another tradition turns the former on its head: the vernaculars are popularized forms of Sanskrit. In any case, the word *sanskrit* means “well or completely formed, perfected; purified, consecrated, hallowed; refined, polished, elaborated.” It’s not surprising that it can also refer to someone who’s a “learned man,” presumably because he has refined his knowledge of Sanskrit. Conversely *prakrit* means “original, artless, ordinary; vulgar, unrefined,” presumably in relation to “perfected” Sanskrit. My Sanskrit-English dictionary (originally published in 1899, and now hopelessly un-PC) notes that, in traditional plays, Prakrit is spoken by “women and other inferior characters.” Hm.

Most venerable Yoga books, like the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Yoga Sutra*, are written in Sanskrit, so serious students of Yoga feel almost duty-bound to learn this language in order to read them in their original language. But I’ll caution you that, despite what you might hear from modern-day aficionados, and before you run out to buy a Sanskrit primer, Sanskrit isn’t an easy language to master.

Why? First you need to learn a brand-new alphabet, with 14 vowels and 36 consonants. Though nobody knows exactly why, the Sanskrit alphabet is called *deva nagari*, which is typically rendered as “divine (*deva*) city (*nagari*).” One boring speculation is that it was an alphabet first used by educated, urban or citified classes. A more romantic tradition says that the alphabet is so-named because Sanskrit is a divine language, spoken *in* the City of the Gods. Today, in addition to Sanskrit, *deva nagari* is used to write Hindi, Marathi, Kashmiri, Sindhi, and Nepali.

Sanskrit has some strange spelling rules. Take what’s called *samyoga*, which means “yoked together”: whenever one consonant immediately follows another (with no intervening vowel), the two are combined. Sometimes you can tell which two letters are being yoked in this way, other times a completely new letter is formed. This means that in addition to the 49 letters of the regular alphabet, you also have to learn at least 60 “conjunct” consonants.

Samyoga is similar to another interesting phonological rule called *sandhi* or “junction.” In traditional Sanskrit, all the words of a sentence follow each other without intervening spaces or punctuation. And so you get long sentences like this one which are very hard to read, unless some editor takes pity and helpfully puts hyphens between the words.

Westerners began the serious study of Sanskrit almost 400 years ago. A German Jesuit missionary, Johann Hanxleden, who lived in India for 33 years until his death in 1732, composed the first Sanskrit grammar in a European language, Latin. Though this book was never published,

it was used as the basis of the first one that was, written by an Austrian missionary, Father Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomeo, in 1790.

The yoga lexicon has a number of interesting and revealing words, just right for communicating the multi-layered concepts of Yoga. These words typically have at least two meanings, one literal or exoteric, the other figurative or esoteric. Take the familiar word *guru*, which we've assimilated into English as an honorific for a respected mentor or leader in a certain field. In Sanskrit *guru* literally means "weighty," suggesting that the bearer of this appellation is heavy with knowledge, like a tree branch laden with ripe fruit. But the Yogis also define *guru* symbolically by splitting it into its two constituent syllables, *gu* and *ru*. The former, they say, means "darkness" (though literally *gu* means "to shout with joy"), the latter "light" (*ru* literally means "to roar"). In this sense, *guru* is the "spiritual parent" who leads the student-child from the darkness of self-ignorance to the light of self-understanding.

Did you know we speak Sanskrit everyday? Well, not exactly Sanskrit, but you can't throw a rock at an English dictionary without hitting a word rooted in, or at least related to, Sanskrit. Examples? How about pepper (*pippalam*, "pepper tree") and sugar (*sakara*)? Through the study of Sanskrit in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its comparison with Latin, Greek, and Persian, early linguists uncovered ancient connections between these languages which they traced back to a parent tongue nowadays called Proto-Indo-European (PIE). Since then, it's been demonstrated that about 150 languages, spoken by three billion people, share this common source. Along with English, these languages include Welsh, Irish, Scottish, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Greek, and Armenian.

Here's a pop quiz (counting 10 points for your final grade). Can you guess what English word each of these Sanskrit roots has morphed into (answers at the end of this section)?

1. Go
2. Sama
3. Matri
4. Rup
5. Raj
6. Pad
7. Nasa
8. Na
9. Naman
10. Mush

ANSWERS to the quiz

1. Cow
2. Same
3. Mother
4. Rupture
5. To reign, be king or chief, rule over, direct > Latin *regere* > rectify, direct, regal, regulate...and, oh yes, Richard
6. Foot > Latin *pes* > pedestrian
7. Nose > nostril, nasal
8. No
9. Name
10. Mouse