

THE LANGUAGE  
OF YOGA

COMPLETE A TO Y GUIDE  
TO ĀSANA NAMES, SANSKRIT  
TERMS, AND CHANTS

Nicolai Bachman

## *Thank You*

David Frawley  
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Jeff Martens  
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and especially  
my wife, Margo,  
for her ever-present support and love.

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# INTRODUCTION

Knowing how to properly pronounce Sanskrit is a crucial skill for serious students and teachers of yoga.

This sacred language originated from oral traditions developed to communicate the spiritual insights of ancient sages. Because Sanskrit is the language of yoga, understanding key Sanskrit terminology and its pronunciation can deepen a practitioner's knowledge of the yogic path. It can also provide a more complete understanding of the meaning and purpose of yoga *āsanas*, or postures—an understanding that is lost when these āsanās are known only by their English names.

Sanskrit is said to have been divinely revealed to meditating sages thousands of years ago. One story tells of Śiva beating his *damaru* drum fourteen times and creating the Sanskrit alphabet. These fourteen “Maheśvara Sūtras” form the beginning of the text defining Sanskrit grammar. The alphabet is perfectly designed for the human vocal apparatus, and the sound of each word represents the subtle energy of its meaning. Because each syllable is either one or two beats, pronouncing correctly allows one to feel the natural rhythm of the language and imbibe the true essence of the word. Sanskrit is called *Devavāṇī* or “language of the Gods” because it is said that the Gods understand and communicate in Sanskrit. Thus, sacred ceremonies like births, weddings, deaths, and religious rituals all involve Sanskrit chanting. The sound of the Vedic hymns is their life, preserved by thousands of generations through chanting.

Because Vedic wisdom was passed down orally long before it was written, no one knows when it actually began. The Vedas are the earliest known Sanskrit writings, beginning with the Ṛg Veda whose written form dates back to at least 1500 BCE. The subsequent three Vedas (Sāma, Yajur,

and Atharva) are all derived from the Ṛg Veda. The Upaniṣads, which form the basis for Vedānta philosophy, are extrapolations and summaries of the Vedas. Taken together, the Vedas and their offspring Upaniṣads are known as *śruti*, meaning “heard,” because they are considered to be of divine origin, originally revealed by enlightened seers.

Yoga, along with *Āyurveda* (Indian medicine), *Jyotiṣa* (Indian astrology), and countless other branches of Vedic wisdom, was passed down orally and literally using the refined Sanskrit language. *Sūtras*, terse aphorisms packed with information and easy to memorize, were often composed to record ideas in the most efficient way possible. Only with the help of a teacher and/or a commentary could a student learn the depth of their meaning. Verses were also written in rhythmic meters, most commonly four lines of either eight or eleven syllables each. Chanting or singing these verses provides another natural and easy way to remember them by heart.

Yoga in the West is often largely focused on practicing physical postures (*āsanas*). However, *āśana* is in fact only one of eight distinct limbs of yoga (see *Aṣṭāṅga*). Knowing the posture names in Sanskrit allows teachers and students to unambiguously refer to a posture. Using the English translation as the reference may be confusing because translations can differ—the same posture may have several different English names. In addition, fully comprehending all parts of an *āśana* name can provide a deeper understanding of its form and function. Noticing how the same word is used in several different posture names will reveal subtle nuances that would otherwise be lost. The Indian process of learning is largely based on viewing an object from a variety of angles, thus seeing it in its complete form.

The purpose of this book is to preserve and encourage the correct sound and spelling of Sanskrit chants and terms related to the science of yoga. This provides a reference for yoga practitioners who wish to perpetuate the vocabulary of yoga in an accurate and respectful way. Seeing terms grouped together in logical arrangements allows one to visualize their relationship to each other.



We hope your journey on the path of yoga will expand and brighten as you experience the audio and visual energy of this beautiful language.

### SANSKRIT PRONUNCIATION NOTES

*Vowel combining:* In Sanskrit, when two vowels meet they will combine into something else. For example, “paścima uttānāsana” becomes “paścimottānāsana” and “marīci āsana” becomes “marīcyāsana.”

*Consonant combining:* In Sanskrit, if the final consonant of one word is not sound-compatible with the initial consonant of the next word, the final consonant may change. For example, “ṣaṭ mukhī” becomes “ṣanmukhī,” “tīryac mukha” becomes “tīryaṅmukha,” and “catur pāda” becomes “catuṣpāda.”

Some Sanskrit sounds are pronounced slightly differently in North and South India. The “v” might sound like a “w” and the “ś” or “ṣ” may sound like a “sh” or a “s.”

There are some differences between Sanskrit and Hindi pronunciation. In Sanskrit, when a word ends with an “a,” the “a” is pronounced. In Hindi it is often dropped, even though it is written the same way. For example, the Sanskrit “āsana” sounds like “āsan” in Hindi.

SANSKRIT	HINDI
“a” at the end of a word is pronounced	“a” at the end of a word is often not pronounced
“ā” at the end of a word is long	“ā” at the end of a word is pronounced a short “a”
“ph” pronounced as an aspirated “p”	“ph” pronounced like “f”

### EXPLANATORY NOTES

The images at the beginning of each section are the geometrical representations (*yantra*) of each elemental *cakra*. Each yantra conveys the energy that matches the associated cakra. The Sanskrit sound in the center of each yantra is that cakra’s primary sound, a single syllable ending in “m.”

SECTION	CAKRA LOCATION	ELEMENT	PRIMARY SANSKRIT SOUND
Chants for Your Practice	throat	space	haṃ
Yoga Terms	heart	air	yaṃ
Aṣṭāṅga Sequences	navel	fire	raṃ
Āsana Names	reproductive area	water	vaṃ
Indices	base of the spine	earth	laṃ

If you cannot find the Sanskrit āsana name in the A–Y section, look in the Āsana Name Synonyms index. Use the English Name Index to locate the posture by English name.

The line drawings are intended as a general representation of each posture. Some variations are not shown. Many postures have several different names, and one name may be used for many postures. The names included here are drawn from the classical systems of yoga and the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar and T.K.V. Desikachar. The first three series of K. Pattabhi Jois' Aṣṭāṅga system are given separately.

Many Sanskrit terms are very complex and difficult to translate into English. Because of this, the suggested meanings are not meant to be definitive. I chose to provide the literal definition for most āsana names. For yoga terms whose common meaning is different than the literal, the literal meaning is shown in quotation marks.

### ĀṢṬĀṆGA SEQUENCES

In Sanskrit the consonants are used to count variations of a posture. So ka=a, kha=b, ga=c, gha=d.

Several postures are not specifically named in the series but are done as transitory postures. These are indicated with an asterisk\*.

Many teachers have modified the first series in different ways, usually adding or deleting postures. The first series presented here is based on K. Pattabhi Jois' own writing in Sanskrit. The second and third series are consistent and drawn from the knowledge of senior practitioners.

The first and last postures (Samasthiti and Utpluti) are pronounced with an “h” on the end by most practitioners. Even though this is inconsistent with the remaining āsana names (which are not pronounced with their ending “m”), out of respect for convention it remains that way here.

Many names in the third series are different than in the A–Y section. For example, “paścimottānāsana” in the A–Y section is spelled “paścimatānāsana” in the Aṣṭāṅga section.



# CHANTS FOR YOUR PRACTICE

*Seven common chants  
recited as part  
of a yoga class*

*Seven yoga sūtras  
relating to the  
definition of  
yoga and āsana*



Sanskrit is a very rhythmic and musical language that lends itself well to singing and chanting. Each syllable is either short (one beat) or long (two beats). Recording the ancient wisdom in standard meters enabled easy memorization via chanting, and therefore provided a useful means of preserving Vedic wisdom over time. The first chant, to Gaṇeśa, is from the Ṛg Veda, the oldest Sanskrit text, written over 3500 years ago. You can tell that it is a Vedic chant by the tonal marks above and below the letters. A horizontal line below a syllable indicates a low tone, no mark means a middle tone, and a vertical line above denotes a high tone. If there are two vertical lines above, you use a middle tone for the first beat, then a high tone for the second beat. Follow the written text as you listen to the audio and you will hear the three tones clearly.

The vast majority of Sanskrit verses are written in meter, usually four lines long with each line being a set number of syllables. The most common meters have either eight or eleven syllables in each line. All chants included here except the first two are in eight or eleven syllable meter.

The sound *Om* is thought to be the original sound from which the entire manifest universe began. Om itself is believed to contain all other sounds and therefore all forms of energy. It is very common to begin and end a chant with Om.

Chanting to a deity invokes that deity's energy, and is an auspicious way to begin a practice or endeavor. Traditionally, throughout India, Gaṇeśa is worshipped first, being the remover of obstacles and bestower of goodness and abundance. After a chant to Gaṇeśa, one performs a chant appropriate to a particular activity, whether it be a practice, meditation, new undertaking, etc. All chants should be recited with a respectful and devotional attitude.

---

## Gaṇānām Tvā (R̥gveda 2.23.1)

A mantra to Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed deity who removes obstacles and grants protection.

### TRACK 1

ॐ

गुणानां॑ त्वा गुणपतिं॑ हवामहे  
कविं॑ कवीनामुपमश्रवस्तमम् ।  
ज्येष्ठराजं॑ ब्रह्मणां ब्रह्मणस्पत॑  
आ नः॑ शृण्वन्तूतिभिस्सीद॑ सादनम् ॥  
श्रीमहागणपतये॑ नमः

Om

gaṇānām॑ tvā gaṇapatiṃ॑ havāmahe,  
kaviṃ॑ kavīnām upamaśravastamaṃ,  
jyeṣṭha-rājaṃ॑ brahmaṇāṃ brahmaṇaspatiṃ॑  
ā naḥ॑ śṛṇvannūtibhissīda॑ sādānam.  
śrī-mahā-gaṇapataye॑ namaḥ

Among all of Śiva's attendants, we invoke you Gaṇeśa,  
the seer of seers, the most glorious and eminent,  
sovereign of all brahmans. Oh Lord of Brahman,  
having heard us, sit nearby with all (your) protective energies.  
Salutations to the great and magnificent Gaṇeśa!

---

## Chant to Sarasvatī

To invoke the energy of speech and learning.

### TRACK 2

या कुन्देन्दुतुषारहारधवला	yā kundendu-tuṣārahāra-dhavalā
या शुभ्रवस्त्रावृता ।	yā śubhra-vastrāvṛtā,
या वीणावरदण्डमण्डितकरा	yā vīṇāvāra-daṇḍa-maṇḍita-karā
या श्वेतपद्मासना ॥	yā śveta-padmāsanā.
या ब्रह्माच्युतशङ्करप्रभृतिभिर्	yā brahmācyutaśaṅkara-prabhṛtibhir
देवैः सदा वन्दिता ।	devaiḥ sadā vanditā,
सा मां पातु सरस्वती भगवती	sā māṃ pātu Sarasvatī bhagavatī
निःशेषजाड्यापहा ॥	niśśeṣajāḍyāpahā.

Who is pure white like a garland of jasmine, the moon or snow,  
covered with white clothing;  
whose hands are decorated with a vīṇā, boon, and staff,  
seated on a white lotus;  
ever worshipped by the gods led by Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva;  
may she, divine Sarasvatī, who removes all darkness, protect me.

---

## Yogena Cittasya

To Patañjali, author of the *Yoga Sūtras*. Often chanted at the beginning of a yoga practice or sūtra class.

### TRACK 3

योगेन चित्तस्य पदेन वाचां  
मलं शरीरस्य च वैद्यकेन ।  
यो ऽपाकरोत्तं प्रवरं मुनीनां  
पतञ्जलिं प्राञ्जलिरानतो ऽस्मि ॥

आबाहुपुरुषाकारं  
शङ्खचक्रासिधारिणम् ।  
सहस्रशिरसं श्वेतं  
प्रणमामि पतञ्जलिम् ॥

श्रीमते अनन्ताय नागराजाय नमो नमः

yogena cittasya padena vācāṃ  
malaṃ śarīrasya ca vaidyakena,  
yo 'pākarottaṃ pravaraṃ munīnāṃ  
Patañjaliṃ prāñjalirānato 'smi.

ābāhu puruṣākāraṃ  
śaṅkha-cakrāsi-dhāriṇaṃ,  
sahasra-śirasaṃ śvetam  
praṇamāmi Patañjalim.

Śrimate anantāya nāgarājāya namo  
namaḥ

I am a deep bow with hands folded to Patañjali,  
the most excellent of sages, who removed  
impurity of consciousness through yoga,  
impurity of speech through word (grammar), and  
impurity of the body through medicine (Āyurveda).

In the form of a man up to the shoulders,  
holding the conch (divine sound), discus (wheel of time),  
and sword (discrimination),  
thousand-headed, white,  
I bow respectfully to Patañjali.

To the magnificent endless one, the king of the nāgas,  
salutations, salutations.



---

## Vande Gurūṇām

Devotion to the lotus feet of all gurus, equated with Śiva. Second half to Patañjali, considered an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Often chanted at the beginning of a yoga practice.

### TRACK 4

वन्दे गुरुणां चरणारविन्दे  
संदर्शितस्वात्मसुखावबोधे ।  
निःश्रेयसे जाङ्गलिकायमाने  
संसारहालाहलमोहशान्त्यै ॥

vande gurūṇāṃ caraṇāravinde  
saṅdarśita-svātma-sukhāvabodhe,  
niḥśreyase jāṅgalikāyamāne  
saṅsāra-hālāhala-moha-śāntyai.

आबाहुपुरुषाकारं  
शङ्खचक्रासिधारिणम् ।  
सहस्रशिरसं श्वेतं  
प्रणमामि पतञ्जलिम् ॥

ābāhu puruṣākāraṃ  
śaṅkha-cakrāsi-dhāriṇaṃ,  
sahasra-śirasaṃ śvetam  
praṇamāmi Patañjalim.

I worship the lotus feet of all the gurus,  
which awaken and manifest joy in oneself;  
beyond comparison, appearing as a snake-charmer (Śiva)  
for pacifying the poisonous delusion of saṅsāra (the cycle of birth  
and death).

In the form of a man up to the shoulders,  
holding the conch (divine sound), discus (wheel of time),  
and sword (discrimination),  
thousand-headed, white,  
I bow respectfully to Patañjali.

---

## Maṅgala Mantra (Auspicious Mantra)

Often chanted at the end of a yoga practice.

### TRACK 5

स्वस्ति प्रजाभ्यः परिपालयन्तां  
न्यायेन मार्गेण महीं महीशाः ।  
गोब्राह्मणेभ्यः शुभमस्तु नित्यं  
लोकाः समस्ताः सुखिनो भवन्तु ॥

svasti prajābhyaḥ paripālayantāṃ  
nyāyena mārgēṇa mahīṃ mahīśāḥ,  
gobrāhmaṇebhyaḥ śubhamastu nityaṃ  
lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu.

Hail to the creators!

May (these) great lords protect the earth properly and justly.

May one be eternally fortunate due to cows (wealth) and Brahmins.

May all worlds be happy.

---

## Śiva Mantra (from Nirālamba Upaniṣad)

Often chanted at the beginning of a yoga practice.

### TRACK 6

ॐ नमः शिवाय गुरवे	Om namaḥ Śivāya gurave
सच्चिदानन्दमूर्तये ।	saccidānanda-mūrtaye,
निष्प्रपञ्चाय शान्ताय	niṣprapañcāya śāntāya
निरालम्बाय तेजसे ॥	nirālambāya tejase.

Salutations to Śiva, the teacher  
whose form is truth, consciousness, and bliss,  
who is without deceit, tranquil,  
independent, and illuminating.

---

## Chant to Kṛṣṇamācārya

Composed by Prof. T. Kṛṣṇamācārya in response to his students' request for a chant that would honor their teacher. Presented here in recognition of Prof. Kṛṣṇamācārya's unparalleled contribution to the understanding and practice of yoga throughout the world.

### TRACK 7

श्रीकृष्णवागीशयतीश्वराभ्यां  
संप्राप्तचक्राङ्कनभाष्यसारम् ।  
श्रीनूत्नरङ्गेन्द्रयतौ समर्पितस्त्वं  
श्रीकृष्णमार्यं गुरुवर्यमीडे ॥

विरोधे कार्तिके मासे  
शतताराकृतोदयम् ।  
योगाचार्यं कृष्णमार्यं  
गुरुवर्यमहं भजे ॥  
श्रीगुरुभ्यो नमः  
हरिः ॐ

Śrī-Kṛṣṇa-Vāgīśa-yatīśvarābhyāṃ  
saṃprāpta-cakrāṅkana-bhāṣyasāram,  
Śrī-nūtna-Raṅgendra-yatau samarpitasvaṃ  
Śrī-Kṛṣṇam-āryaṃ guruvaryam iḍe.

virodhe kārtike māse  
śatatārā-kṛtodayaṃ,  
yogācāryaṃ Kṛṣṇam-āryaṃ  
guru-varyam-ahaṃ bhaje.  
Śrī-gurubhyo namaḥ  
Hariḥ Om

I praise (our) principle teacher, the venerable Śrī Kṛṣṇamācārya,  
who obtained the essence of Vedānta from Śrī Vāgīśa,  
(and) the cakra-marking from Śrī Kṛṣṇa,  
both master ascetics (and teachers),  
(and) who entrusted himself completely in Śrī Raṅgendra, ascetic  
(and teacher).

Born in (the year of) Virodha,  
during the month of Kārtika  
(under the) star of Śata,  
to (this) teacher of yoga,  
the venerable Śrī T. Kṛṣṇamācārya  
(our) principle teacher, I pray.

---

## Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali

Written by Patañjali between 500–200 BCE, this concise set of 196 aphorisms has become the most widely accepted treatise on yoga as a development of human consciousness. Included here are a few sūtras that define yoga and relate to āsana. In the original Sanskrit script, the chapter number and sūtra number are shown at the end of the sūtra and are surrounded by vertical lines called *danḍa*. These correspond to the “chapter#.sūtra#” shown below.

### TRACK 8

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥ १.२ ॥

1.2 yogaścittavṛttinirodhah

Yoga is stilling the fluctuations in (one’s) consciousness.

तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपे ऽवस्थानम् ॥ १.३ ॥

1.3 tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe 'vasthānam

Then, the abiding of the seer in (its) own true nature.

वृत्तिसारूप्यमितरत्र ॥ १.४ ॥

1.4 vṛttisārūpyamitaratra

Otherwise, conformity/identity with the fluctuations.

यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यानसमाधयो ऽष्टावङ्गानि ॥ २.२९ ॥

2.29 yamaniyamāsanapraṇāyāmapratyāhāradhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo  
`ṣṭāvaṅgāni

The eight limbs are yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā,  
dhyāna, (and) samādhi.

स्थिरसुखमासनम् ॥ २.४६ ॥

2.46 sthirasukhamāsanam

Āsana (has the qualities of) stability and comfort ...

प्रयत्नशैथिल्यानन्तसमापत्तिभ्याम् ॥ २.४७ ॥

2.47 prayatnaśaithilyānantasamāpattibhyām

... due to relaxation with appropriate effort and convergence with the infinite.

ततो द्वन्द्वानभिघातः ॥ २.४८ ॥

2.48 tato dvandvānabhighātaḥ

From that, no disturbance from the pairs of opposites.