

Namast

by Greg Wythes  
Sanskrit.

The language of yoga or the language of exclusion?

Hatha Yoga

Samaadhi

Samaadhi

**While no one would dispute the central importance of Sanskrit to yoga, the use of Sanskrit does appear to induce some apprehension, confusion and even alienation in many of the new students that come to yoga classes today. Yoga can become less accessible when students have difficulty with the language of the class, and it is entirely possible that the language barrier is turning some people away from yoga toward exercise systems, such as Pilates, which hold none of this mystery.**

Initially students may encounter this language barrier when they see the diverse range of approaches available, such as Ashtanga, Satyananda, Raja, Dru, Vinyasa, Iyengar – and even the simple use of the word ‘hatha’ – and they are trying to make sense of these words and find an approach that suits them. Later, in class, this language barrier can appear to expand as the newcomer encounters an entirely new and often baffling vocabulary of multi-syllable words, combined with a range of unfamiliar accents and intonations.

Nor is the use of Sanskrit unified across the different styles of yoga. Pronunciations change from style to style. Posture names can differ depending on the style you practise. Some teachers use only a little Sanskrit and give English equivalents. Some use the Sanskrit terms almost exclusively. There is a wide range of diversity in the approach of individual teachers, so that even a relatively experienced student in one style can encounter confusion when changing to or practising in another style.

One of the major issues for beginning students is the subtle barrier that Sanskrit puts up. From a sociological perspective, many sub-cultures or groups within a broader society set up barriers to people who are new to the group; for example the surfing sub-culture has a particular vocabulary that can only be learned by immersion in the group for a considerable time. But once the newcomer has acquired the cultural capital and can understand and use the vocabulary and language, then they are accepted into the group. There are rules of acceptance into any group, though many of these rules are subliminal or virtually unconscious.

Does a similar process occur as people begin yoga? To what degree does the use

of Sanskrit exclude and discriminate against people who haven’t yet acquired – or aren’t interested in acquiring – a knowledge of Sanskrit? And if this is the case, how appropriate is it in the field of yoga, which many view as a healing and holistic practice?

Is a basic understanding of Sanskrit necessary to practise yoga? How important is Sanskrit in yoga’s history and how relevant is it to the way yoga is practised today in the West? Is it possible to translate the Sanskrit terms to English equivalents and would doing so make any difference? Is Sanskrit used as a language of exclusion?

While it is clear that most of the current yoga teacher training programs in Australia recognise the importance of Sanskrit to the students enrolled in their courses, it is less clear that Sanskrit is as important to the student who attends a class once or twice a week. Leigh Blashki, founder of the Australian Institute of Yoga and author of the Advanced Diploma of Yoga Teaching, advocates a varied approach to its use.

“As teachers we need to be there for the needs of our students,” says Leigh, “and not just to satisfy our egos with how much we can show we know. The intention of the teacher should be the best interest of the student. We need to be mindful of the needs of the student and not just show blind adherence to systems of teaching that may not be appropriate.

“I always come back to Desikachar’s dictum that you start where someone is,” says Leigh. “Beginning students are not Sanskrit scholars, so we start with the

student, where he or she is, and slowly build it up. This is good teaching methodology. It’s about how people learn and how to relate to each person individually. It doesn’t have to be the same for everyone.”

Richard Clark, from the Ashtanga Yoga Shala in Brisbane, has a similar view.

“I give students options in everything,” says Richard. “I often use the English and the Sanskrit terms as well as demonstrating physically and explaining verbally. I try not to press anything so that the teaching doesn’t serve to confuse them. I try to share what is appropriate. It’s an inner feeling we’re trying to cultivate, regardless of the terminology. If you feel it in the heart, the language may be irrelevant. But at deeper levels of self inquiry the Sanskrit is there as a signpost.”

There have been attempts in the past to teach yoga using mainly English terminology and one of the most notable of these is the style developed by American teacher Joel Kramer. Joel had an academic background in Western philosophical and psychological traditions, and his endeavour to forge a third way that combined East and West was quite influential in the United States during the 1980s. Some of his concepts, such as ‘working your edge’ and ‘lines of energy’ have become part of yoga usage, but generally his ideas have not entered the mainstream yoga world. Perhaps the timing was wrong. Joel’s period in the 1980s

coincided with the ascendancy of the Iyengar style – a style with a quite prescribed use of Sanskrit – and as the Iyengar approach became the orthodoxy of the age, some other approaches lost their appeal.

“In the recent book, *Yoga Rx*, by Larry Payne,” reports Leigh Blashki, “there is hardly one Sanskrit word in the first 100 pages and it doesn’t lose the spirit of yoga at all. The approach is therapy based, so it is strictly physiological, and in this context the use of English is entirely appropriate.”

“I don’t use Sanskrit for everything,” says Moina Bower, Australian President of the International Yoga Teachers’ Association, “but mainly for the major postures. In the teacher training we provide we ensure that

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the students know both the Sanskrit and English names for the postures.”

So for many students the use of Sanskrit in class may not be relevant or appropriate and the use of English equivalents or even just detailed explanation of the specific posture with regard to alignment and positioning of body parts, without naming the posture, may be sufficient. But for the long term or more serious student, a study of Sanskrit can add much depth to their yoga practice.

“Sanskrit is an ancient and difficult language,” says Richard Clark, “But we shouldn’t be scared of it. We all have friends from various ethnic backgrounds – Greek, Polish, Vietnamese et cetera – with long names that we have no difficulty with. But Sanskrit need not be a prerequisite for the beginning student. At one level the use of Sanskrit clearly differentiates yoga, especially hatha yoga, from other physical disciplines, such as gymnastics. There aren’t always adequate English equivalents and it’s important for yoga to have its own nomenclature.”

“Sanskrit is an intrinsic part of the culture of yoga,” says Moina Bower. “In

much the same way that French is a part of ballet and Spanish is a part of horse riding, Sanskrit is central to yoga. To try to change the language entirely to English would only bring more variation and difficulty.”

Sanskrit is one of the world’s oldest classical languages, dating back over 3,000 years. It is older than Latin and Greek but

were intent on discovering their own true nature. The ancient rishis of India fine-tuned the language over many centuries until it was finally codified in 500 BC in the grammatical treatise of Panini. Since then it has remained virtually unmodified. Its decline as a spoken language began around 1100 AD with the Muslim

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shares the same Indo-European roots. Most languages developed with communication as their primary objective, but Sanskrit was developed with a spiritual purpose, as a tool for people who

invasion, when regional languages like Hindi and Urdu began to grow in popularity. Still, as the language of scholarship in India, its achievements are unsurpassed.

Sanskrit is a language of mathematical precision. Indeed, NASA has discovered that it is the world's only unambiguous spoken language. It possesses a system of grammar and linguistics that affords a deep subtlety and precision of expression, and it boasts a huge body of literature in philosophy, religion, fiction, poetry, science, mathematics, astronomy,

may be simply descriptive. 'Janusirshasana' can be simply broken down to its components – *janu*/knee, *sirsh*/head, and *asana*/posture – to become 'Head-to-knee posture'.

For Richard Clark, however, the richness of Sanskrit is in itself a beneficial aspect of its application to yoga, particularly for the experienced student.

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medicine, law and politics. Sanskrit can be seen as the foundation stone of Hindu and Indian culture and civilisation.

“Sanskrit contains the building blocks of many modern languages,” says Richard Clark. “Its grammatical rules are very accurate. It's a very rich language, a spiritual language and one that is said to be of divine origins. It means polished and perfected. For students who want to go deeper into the rich philosophy of yoga, Sanskrit is important.”

In the early stages of practice in yoga, the student's main encounter with Sanskrit will be with the names of the postures. For Leigh Blashki this involves a study of the word and what lies behind it.

“I endeavour to break down the Sanskrit words to understand the subtleties and the philosophy behind them. Knowing Sanskrit terms is about knowing the intent of the yoga masters who chose them. It's finding the instructional or beneficial purpose of the term.

“Some asana or posture words are very indicative. 'Apanasana', for example, relates to one of the five *pranas* or *vayus*. It suggests a region of the body for focus as well as the balancing of the downward movement of energy, so how you approach this posture can be affected by this awareness. So in this case it's informative to understand the purpose behind the word.

“Other posture words may not offer the student any more information than an English equivalent. 'Bhujangasana' doesn't seem to me any more informative than 'Cobra Pose'. And other posture words

“For the serious student, Sanskrit gives a different power to the posture,” says Richard. “Postures are often named after animals, plants, gods or mythical creatures. There can be a rich symbolism in the name and a story behind it. If we look at 'Hanumanasana' for instance, the English equivalent is 'Front splits posture,' and this carries none of the depth of the Sanskrit word. Hanuman is the monkey god from Hindu mythology and the posture name is derived from the story of when Hanuman, as a messenger of Rama, leapt across the sea from India to Sri Lanka. As well, he is considered to be a god who embodies devotion, power and strength. So an understanding of some of the elements that lie within the Sanskrit word can bring a great deal more depth to the practise of the posture.”

“In the teacher training programs we provide,” continues Leigh Blashki, “we try to bring everything back to the purpose of yoga. And this is just as relevant to the use of Sanskrit. We want people to find how yoga can nurture them and this is based on a strong philosophical base that we draw from A G Mohan. Yoga is about personal re-integration – re-integration at many levels from the personal to the universal. So when the use of Sanskrit facilitates this process of re-integration it's useful for the individual, and an understanding of Sanskrit helps. But we need to examine the term to see if it contains something quintessential.

“Some terms cannot be adequately translated into English but they can be felt into to find the understanding of the term. Once a person has experienced a posture

and related this experience to the Sanskrit, then the Sanskrit can carry more meaning for the individual.”

So if the use of Sanskrit does have a purpose – and increasingly so as the experience of the student grows – how can we reconcile the various approaches of different styles and different teachers to the use of Sanskrit? And would a unified code of practice, particularly with regard to spelling and pronunciation, make it any easier for the student?

“Diversity is both a strength and a weakness of virtually all Eastern traditions and practices,” says Richard Clark. “And it is often the hardest thing for the Western mind to accommodate. The diversity in yoga – in styles and approaches, as well as the use of Sanskrit – reflects the broader diversity of the Indian culture that produced it.

“Many of the differences in pronunciation are due to regional differences in India. In the spoken form in some traditions the 'a' is often dropped from the final syllable – 'asana' becomes 'asan' – and this is simply a feature of the Hindi language.”

One further facet of Sanskrit that has to be recognised is the power of the sound of the language. Though meaning is perhaps the most important function of a language, the sound of a language expresses something entirely different and gives access to an entirely different part of the psyche. The ancient rishis of India were intent on developing Sanskrit as a tool for inner discovery and it is often in the sounds themselves, not necessarily the meaning, that the real power resides. The sounds of particular Sanskrit words are sounds attuned to vibration and harmony and to the effects of these on the person hearing, saying, singing or chanting the words.

“It's not always necessary to know what a Sanskrit word or mantra means,” says Leigh Blashki. “Sometimes not being involved intellectually is beneficial. It circumvents the intellect and the movement of the mind. Used in this way Sanskrit can bring a deeper aspect of meditation to a class.

“It's very much like Gregorian chanting or the way sound is used in many spiritual traditions. We may not know what the words mean but we know the sound of them makes us feel better. We see this in the way Australian aborigines use the

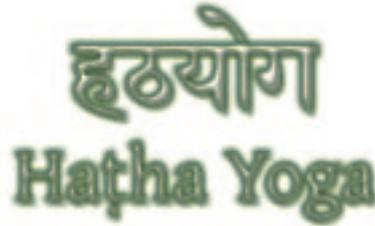
didgeridoo, in Native American use of sound and chanting and particularly in the Tibetan traditions. It's the quality of the vibrational sound, combined with its tonality and pitch. Used in this way, though, correct pronunciation of the Sanskrit becomes very important.

"Generally, as well, there is a repetitive tunefulness to the way the sound is used. The melody is simple, unadorned and meditative so it doesn't engage the intellect or complicate the emotions. And on another level, yoga contains a wide range of Sanskrit words where the resonant sound quality relates to various parts or systems within the body and can be used to affect the chakras, the koshas or various energy systems."

"The sound of Sanskrit," says Richard Clark, "especially when chanted, allows the student to step out of the habitual patterns of the mind – as long as people can let go of their preconceptions and go with it. Sanskrit used in this way is a movement towards silence through sound."

There appears to be no simple solution to the issues that surround the use of Sanskrit in the modern, Western yoga class. And

that is most likely a good thing. What does seem clear, however, is that *how* Sanskrit is used should depend on the experience of the student and the teacher's sensitivity to that experience.



"As is so often the case in yoga," says Richard Clark, "there are often different answers to the same question, depending on where the student is up to. It all depends on the developmental stage of the student."

"The use of Sanskrit should be student focused, not teacher focused," says Leigh Blashki. "And the aim should be to do no harm to the student. In some situations it may be harmful to the student to make them struggle with inappropriate words. Conversely, we can harm the student by withholding Sanskrit and not allowing

them the full and rich experience of the language. This is a process approach based on respect – a quality inherent in the yamas and niyamas."

The richness of Sanskrit and its importance as the language of yoga is not really in question. But what is not so straightforward is the way Sanskrit is used today in the contemporary yoga class. The question of appropriateness is one that needs to be considered by all teachers and schools. Perhaps Sanskrit is not always the best tool for teaching yoga, and it may not always serve the needs of the student, no matter how central it may be to the individual teacher or to the school or to yoga in general. This is a question that will no doubt continue to be debated by the yoga community and perhaps the answer will always be an individual one for teacher and student alike.

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