

SANSKRIT

Sanskrit is an ancient language originating from oral traditions to communicate spiritual wisdom. The written form is said to date back to the scriptures known as the Vedas – around 1500-2000 BC, yet still listed as one of today's 22 national languages of India.

Sanskrit is found in the ancient texts of yoga, and is often used in yoga classes to describe postures (asana), practices and other terms that you may have heard your teacher use e.g. chakra (energy centre), mantra (chant, sacred sound), drishti (gaze point) and mudra (seal, gesture).

Why use Sanskrit?

- The universal language of yoga – whether I'm in a class in London, New York, Rome or New Delhi if the teacher says "savasana" I know it's time to lie down and rest. This common thread can also encourage a feeling of community and shared experience in our practice.
- Keeps the tradition and history of yoga alive. With the use of Sanskrit in our yoga practise, we can acknowledge the many yogis who have gone before us and used the same language throughout the millenia.
- Not only are we learning postures, we're also learning a new language – encouraging our grey matter to work and keeping the brain active and healthy.
- The healing power of sound – feeling the vibrations of a Sanskrit chant (mantra), particularly in a group, can be a powerful and even healing experience. Have you ever experienced goosebumps when listening to a piece of music – we can experience this when chanting Sanskrit mantra.
- Sanskrit can convey a deep spiritual concept in a single word which in English might take many – this depth of meaning can help to enrich our understanding of yoga. For example, Om (describing the source of all sounds of the universe) or Namaste (The divine light in me bows to the divine light in you).

But...

It's useful to use both Sanskrit and English posture names in our yoga classes - how might a beginner feel in their first ever yoga class if only Sanskrit names are being used? Overwhelmed, perhaps even excluded – the odd one out who doesn't understand what's going on?

Pronunciation... Sanskrit is a beautiful and complex language and can take years to learn and master. So are we doing justice to this ancient language? There are many ways in which Sanskrit is mispronounced, so if you would like to deepen your knowledge you can study Sanskrit with an experienced teacher or linguist specialising in Sanskrit, or there are lots of useful resources online that can help. The most important thing is to give it a go – try using the Sanskrit when you can. The pronunciation will develop over time.

Common Yoga Terms

Asana names often sound long and complicated. To help us recognise and learn the names, we can break the longer words down into their component parts. The names of asana are commonly from four categories:

Animals | Body Parts | Sages & Deities | Objects

Additionally, asana names are broken down into numbers, and directions / positions

Directions / Positions

- adho = downward
- parivrtta = revolved
- prasarita = spread
- supta = supine
- utthita = extended

Animals

- bhujanga = serpent
- garuda = eagle
- go = cow
- salabha = locust
- sasa = rabbit
- ustra = camel

Body Parts

- hasta = hand
- janu = knee
- jathara = stomach
- mukha = face
- pada = foot/leg

Numbers

- eka = one
- dvi = two
- tri = three

Objects

- danda = staff
- tada = mountain
- vrksa = tree

References & further inspiration:

The Language of Yoga: Nicolai Bachman