



The power of mantra

Do you ever wonder why your yoga teachers use Sanskrit for yogic chants, meditations and more? The sounds of this ancient vibrational language speak to more than just your intellect — they're said to connect you to the divine.

Words Kylie Terraluna

"Sanskrit reflects the primal sounds through which the entire universe is created, by which it is sustained, and into which it is eventually dissolved." - Dr David Frawley

Why are yogic chants in Sanskrit and not in English? Why does your yoga teacher introduce poses in an exotic tongue? What's the rationale for chanting, speaking, writing and visualising this ancient language of India, and meditating upon its sounds? To answer these questions, I'll explore Sanskrit through *nada* yoga, the yoga of sound, and uncover why *mantra*, or words of power, are said to be the single most important practices to lead you to the deeper states of yogic bliss.

You'll also meet some of Australia's most well-known mantra musicians, artists who make Sanskrit more accessible with their soul-soothing sounds and uplifting chill-out tunes, to find out what mantra means to them. They perform *kirtan* — devotional mantras from ancient Vedic texts — in spaces such as sacred circles, concerts, yoga studios, ashrams and in community halls.

But, why do they choose Sanskrit, when it can translate into English?

Mother of tongues

Sanskrit is an ancient, pure and sacred poetic language. It is called the "deva lingua" — the language of the gods — and the "mother of tongues". In Vedic and tantric understanding, all of creation is comprised of vibration, and Sanskrit, as a vibrational language, directs the mind through the spiritual heart to the source of all vibration.

Your *chakras* (energy centres of the body) are intimately connected to the vibrational patterns or sound code of the universe. They can be harmonised through the Sanskrit

alphabet, which has the same number of letters as there are petals on the first six chakras. Vedic scholar Dr David Frawley says the Sanskrit alphabet holds the key to cosmic sound: "The letters of the Sanskrit alphabet reflect the prime powers of creation through which everything in the universe is structured, down to the physical body itself."

As a root tongue, Sanskrit has birthed many languages, and energetically offers nurturance, health and protection. Perhaps this is why the Sanskrit alphabet is referred to as *Matrika*: The Mother. It is also known as "She who binds and she who sets free", referring to the bondage of *samskara* (mental imprints). According to ancient wisdom, until you utilise the tools of freedom, you are

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bound by unconscious mental patterning. Sanskrit mantras are the tools, offering the means for meditative understanding.

In the term "mantra", "manas" means "mind", "man" means "contemplation" and "meditation", and "tra" means "to protect" or "free from". Through mantra, the mind is free to become one with the unmanifest sound of the universe. While there are chants for things such as love or improved career outcomes, these kinds of mantras bring consequences in the form of *karma* that binds you to *rajasic* (passionate) worldly life. Pure, *sattvic* chants are for your spiritual evolution. Dr Frawley

advises that you get to know your *dharma* (righteous actions) first and then mantra can reflect the laws of the universe within you. Mantra, after all, is the language of dharma.

Mantra yoga

Mantra as a therapy is applied in Ayurveda to remove negative emotional patterns and karmic blocks. In Vedic astrology, mantra is used to appease malefic (unfavourable) planets and improve the karma of your life. In *vastu shastra*, the Indian science of architecture, mantras are chanted when installing *yantras* (sacred geometry) and to achieve overall harmony with the elements. In yoga, mantra is pure devotion.

There are *bija* (seed) mantras, *shakti* (feminine energetic) mantras and name mantras for various deities. Dr Frawley suggests you repeat mantra while performing *asana* (yoga postures) to transcend body consciousness, and practise *pranayama* (breathing exercises) with mantra to connect with the cosmic *prana* (life force) for deeper vitality.

Why not English?

While Sanskrit is front and centre in *kirtan*, many mantra musicians do combine English with Sanskrit in their songs and sing devotional words in other languages as well. Kevin James Carroll (kevinjamesheartsongs.com) chants in Sanskrit, yet also writes a vast number of songs in English. "I feel some of my songs in English are mantras," he says. "I see mantra as a string of words that create an emotional response, and this is the essence of mantra. I consciously choose mantras that I feel people can accept globally, because I work with people all over the world." Carroll tends towards Sanskrit, though, because, "It is



the oldest language on the planet and has an incredible science and knowledge behind it; and it is beautiful to sing. Everyone can get their tongue around it no matter their nationality, because it is based on sounds."

There are words of power in all languages, yet Sanskrit considers not only the word as sacred but the sound of the word as well. In his book *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*, Dr Frawley explains that Sanskrit language has a deeper impact on consciousness because of this relationship between word and sound. Sanskrit words impact your vibrations through the energy of the sounds in different qualities of vowels and consonants, in how sounds are made for meaning and other elements such as how much force is used to form the sounds. Dr Frawley cites *shanti* as an example, a word which translates to "peace" in English. In Sanskrit, the root "sham" means

The way of the chant

Curious about how you can turn your life and thoughts into mantra? Here are some steps you can follow to practise yoga of sound:

- Consciously begin replacing thoughts with a chosen mantra, such as *om* or *so ham*. Turn your thoughts to the meaning of the mantra and chant it internally or externally, as you go about your tasks and in meditation.
- Any time you feel off-centre, return to the mantra until it is sustained in your consciousness, chanting itself in your being. Consciously allow the chant to alter your breath, and align the breath with the rhythm of the chant.
- Make your life a sacred offering through the power of divine words, in each and every moment you can.
- Chant over your food for blessings, over the water you drink and use for watering plants, and when near rivers, the ocean and all water sources to energise the mantra.
- Write the mantra down, then purify and energise it by burning the paper into sacred fire.
- Chant mantras over prayer flags in your home and chant over incense, crystals, flowers and sacred stones.
- Listen for the spirit of the mantra as you chant it, allowing a divine relationship to develop within you.
- Learn the Sanskrit alphabet and chant it often with pure intentions.
- Feel for the sound current of the mantra and follow it with your awareness.
- Find chanting circles that you enjoy and attend kirtan performances.
- Support the work of Australian mantra musicians with their beautiful compilations.

“to calm” and is a peaceful sound. By contrast, the English equivalent, “peace”, has a harsher sound quality and is not reflective of its meaning.

Not religion, just nature

Through mantra, the mind becomes silent and reflective. Mantra musician Edo Kahn (edoandjo.com) says the devotion to a chant “is not about religion, it is for nature”. “Nature is for everyone, for all beings and all creation,” he continues. When sung with devotion, the mantra is energised by your dedication, your *sankalpa* (pure intention), your thoughts and feelings.

For example, the mantra *Om Namō Narayani*, explains Kahn, “means that I surrender to the power in everything”. He says the power of this mantra is what led him to become a mantra musician in the first place: “It is my breath, my medicine, my everything.” It brings love, he says. “If we

don’t love ourselves, we can’t love others and our culture lacks devotion. Make one eye devotion, and the other selfless service.”

Careful what you say

A lack of devotion may lead to carelessness with thoughts and words, as we can underestimate the power they wield. Mantra, on the other hand, can help redirect and protect your mind from negativity and negative feelings such as fear, jealousy and hatred. It helps “break up deep-seated mental and emotional patterns, conditioning and traumas, even from childhood”, Dr Frawley explains.

Mantra can also awaken the higher potentials of the brain and change the flow of energy in the nervous system. According to Dr Frawley, “Unless we learn to harmonise our inner sound vibrations, our lives will likely remain in disharmony and suffering ... Mantra is

the most important tool for attuning our bodies and minds to their proper resonance, which is not with the outer world, but with the Divine presence that constitutes our own deepest self.”

Pure bliss

To get more insight into what motivates mantra musicians, I spoke to Lulu and Mischka (luluandmischka.com) after one of their beautiful kirtan evenings in Sydney. The couple, seated on a softly lit stage with accompanying musicians, are complete, surrounded by candles and serene lighting. A rounded, full moon reflected on the darkened waters of a painted canvas provides a perfect, unifying, feminine backdrop to the evening’s sacred atmosphere. Some of the audience are seated on the floor, many others behind on chairs and the entire space is filled with song and exquisite accompaniments, while a projector screen displays the language of Sanskrit so attendees can learn and chant along. Kahn and his wife, Jo, have always performed this way too. The communal gathering and experience is divine.

Mischka says, “Sanskrit has always fascinated me because of the feelings that arise through the mantras. There is an experience of just the sounds — without even knowing the deities or other meanings of any Sanskrit mantras — that touches something deep inside of me.” “When we chant or speak the Sanskrit mantras,” adds Lulu, “there is something inviting and poetic in your mouth that is rhythmic and dances on your lips... There is a deep knowing that all is connected to divine grace. You don’t have to fear that you’re connected to some crazy dogma, it is a practice to calm your mind and connect to your heart space.”

Devotional singer Carroll lives the bliss of mantra. “Once you’ve had a taste of bliss, the rest is just experience,” he says.

“The pinnacle is bliss because it is an outcome of connection to the source, and ultimately the source is bliss ... I have not found anything that comes near to music, chanting and mantra to get us there as a group so efficiently, so quickly.” Carroll, who noticed that after chanting circles people “sink back into separation”, began to run retreats in the dark for three weeks, with chanting daily. “No one comes back from these the same,” he says. “Through chanting, everyone on that journey has a major life change.”

Lulu describes her own experiences: “When I chant, at first there is effort involved, where you learn for the first time to start the rhythm in your breath, mouth and words. After a period of time repeating it, it is almost like a train, chugging along, then a continuous flowing momentum happens and, in this beautiful progression, I experience no-mind. Time disappears. In my body, I feel this expansiveness, that the illusion of separation totally dissolves and any concept of it is gone. When the chant comes to a conclusion, the sounds or the words stop and all that is left is the sound and vibration in your body. You are sitting in this heightened vibration and it is incredibly beautiful and powerful to rest in this place of deep stillness.”

Getting started

There is no prerequisite or advancement for beginning mantra, it can commence at any stage on your yogic journey. Bija mantras are the seeds: single-syllable mantras that reflect the primal sounds of the universe. You can practise these now, simply by chanting “om”.

Shakti mantras direct higher energies and higher consciousness. They relate to the Goddess or Divine Mother. You can use these mantras to create, sustain or dissolve various forms, patterns and forces within you, and there are many shakti mantras to experience.



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Universal mantras can be shared and chanted by all. You can choose from the short list below for your practice, using online resources to guide you in the words and pronunciation. After some time, you may find yourself considering if your path includes your own personal mantra, given through initiation by a guru or teacher.

- Any time: *om* (aum). Om is the most important of all mantras. It is the word of God, opens the energy, expands, ascends and unifies
- For surrender: *om namo narayani*
- Before dawn and at dusk: Gayatri Mantra
- For unity consciousness and protection: Moola Mantra
- For love: *om kleem krishna namaha*
- For abundance: *om shring maha lakshmiya namaha*
- For new beginnings and to clear obstacles: *om gam ganapatiye namaha*
- For peace: *om shanti*
- Protection: *om namah shivaya*
- At night: *so ham*. This is the most common form of mantra pranayama;

you sing “so” breathing up your spine, and “ham” (pronounced “hum”) down the spine, with variations on this theme. So ham means: “I am God or pure consciousness”

The beauty of mantra is that, as Kahn reflects, “It will bring everything that yoga is designed to do: it will bring the breath, peace, bliss, joy and self-realisation. If you just sit and chant mantra, you are practising asana, you are practising pranayama, because you are working with the breath, and also the *yamas* and *niyamas* (ethical precepts) because you can’t do anything bad and you’re not doing any harm. Then, you naturally go into concentration and meditation. If you can just have the mantra going inside of you all day long, it is enough.”

Open to the language of Sanskrit through nada yoga. Chant it, write it, study it and breathe it, entering into the nature of bliss. Allow mantra to chant you into the source of pure consciousness; the loving union of all that is, ever was and will ever be. ♪