

Guide to Sanskrit Pronunciation

There is an audio companion to this document, in which you can hear these words pronounced. It is available at <insert URL here>.

Tips and Techniques

When a Sanskrit word is written using English letters, it is called *transliteration*. Since the set of vowels and consonants in Sanskrit are different from those of English, reading transliterated Sanskrit can be a challenge. The following tips and techniques will help you read transliterated Sanskrit, and help you get an idea of how it should be pronounced.

Tip 1: Know the long and short vowels

In English, a vowel can either be short (e.g. foot) or long (e.g. cool). Sanskrit also has long and short vowels. The problem is, it is hard to find out just by looking at the spelling, which vowel is long and which one is short. Let's take an example: a yoga posture is called 'asana' in Sanskrit. If you make the second 'a' long, then it becomes 'a-saa-na', which is incorrect. If you make the first 'a' long, then it becomes 'aa-sa-na', which is correct.

In this document, we will write long vowels using uppercase letters and short vowels using lower-case letters. Here are a few Sanskrit terms with their proper vowel lengths:

Divine Joy	A-nun-da
Downward Facing Dog Pose	a-dhO mu-kha shvA-nA-sa-na
Interiorization	pra-tyA-hA-ra
Standing Mountain Pose	tA-dA-sa-na
Non-covetousness (3 rd Yama)	A-stE-ya

How do you find which vowels are long and which ones are short when looking at a name? Generally speaking, this is tricky. If you are an Ananda Yoga Teacher, your manual tells you, for each asana, the long and the short vowels in the name. This document gives that information for many common Sanskrit terms, asanas, and pranayamas.

(Sanskrit doesn't really have a long and a short 'o'. However, when it is pronounced, the 'o' is usually medium long, like in the word 'yoga'. To bring out this quality, I have written it as if it were a long 'O')

Tip 2: Know which consonants are aspirated

In English, some consonants can be aspirated. To see what aspiration is, say the word ‘ten’ and the word ‘stun’.

‘t’ is aspirated when you say ‘ten’ – there is a puff of air that accompanies the end of the consonant. If you had a candle in front of you and said ‘ten’, the flame would flicker as a result of the aspirated ‘t’.

In ‘stun’, the ‘t’ sound flows smoothly, without any interruption – it is un-aspirated.

Most consonants in Sanskrit have aspirated and un-aspirated variations. Here are a few terms with aspirated consonants in them (which are underlined):

Cobra Pose **bhu-jun-gA-sa-na**

Perfect Pose si-**ddhA-sa-na**

Root, or Coccyx Center mU-lA-**dhA-ra**

Absorption sa-mA-**dhi**

It is easy to find out the aspirated consonant in when looking at the spelling – they have an ‘h’ after the letter to indicate aspiration. For example, the ‘h’ following the ‘b’ in ‘**Bhujangasana**’ indicates aspiration on the ‘b’.

Tip 3: Know how to say your s's

The letter ‘s’ is pronounced one way in ‘sip’ and another way in ‘shout’. These are called *sibilants*. Sanskrit also has sibilants; sometimes one makes the ‘ssss’ sound when saying an ‘s’; other times one makes the ‘shhh’ sound. Sibilants are a complex topic; purists will insist on several variations. But in practice, these variations are too nuanced to be heard easily. In the interest of simplicity, we will talk about two variations: the ‘ssss’ sound like ‘sip’, and the ‘shhh’ sound like ‘shout’.

Here are some Sanskrit terms with the ‘ssss’ sound:

Shoulder Stand sar-vAn-gA-sa-na

Perfect Pose si-ddhA-sa-na

Truthfullness sa-tya

Crown Center sa-ha-srA-ra

Here are some terms with the ‘shhh’ sound:

Corpse Pose	sha-vA-sa-na
Camel Pose	ush-trA-sa-na
Throat, or Cervical Center	vi-shu-ddha
Purity	shou-cha

To make things more fun, here are some terms which have both variations in them:

Vasishtha's Pose	va-si-shthA-sa-na
Sacral Center	swa-dhi-shtA-na
Contentment	san-tO-sha

How to find out which ‘s’s are ‘ssss’ and which ones are ‘shhh’? Some transliterations put an ‘h’ next to the ‘s’ to make this clear; so, if you see an ‘sh’, then you should pronounce it with ‘shhh’. However, you cannot rely on it; Corpse Pose is frequently spelled as ‘Savasana’ even though the first ‘s’ is the ‘shhh’ sound. This document has explicitly called out the sibilant to use for common Sanskrit terms and asana names.

Other Suggestions

As is the case with most subjects, 20% of the information takes you 80% of the way. The 3 tips above are this 20%, and should take you a long way in supercharging your Sanskrit. In a tutorial of this nature, it is not possible to capture all the nuances of Sanskrit pronunciation. However, if you are feeling a bit more intrepid, here’re a few more suggestions which will fine-tune your Sanskrit.

Mind your ‘c’s

The word ‘chakra’ is often pronounced as ‘shA-kra’. This is because the ‘ch’ signals to us to make the ‘shA’ sound (a sibilant!). It is more accurate however, to pronounce the ‘ch’ like you would in the word ‘chart’. Therefore, ‘chakra’ is pronounced as ‘cha-kra’

Roll your ‘r’s

It is generally a good idea to roll your ‘r’s when saying Sanskrit words. Again, to take the example of ‘chakra’, try *gently* rolling the ‘r’ when you say it. For more practice, try ‘bha-stri-ka’ (the Bellows Breath). Don’t over-roll, like ‘cha-krrra’ or ‘bha-strri-ka’ – that will add a harsh quality to the word; instead, just be aware of the need to roll the ‘r’ as you say the word.

Dropped ‘a’s

You will often hear people drop the final ‘a’ in many words. For example, ‘asana’ becomes ‘asan’, ‘pranayama’ becomes ‘pranayam’ and even ‘yoga’ becomes ‘yog’. This has to do with the differences among various regional pronunciations in India. In some regions, the trailing ‘a’ is dropped while saying a word and in other regions, it is not.

In Sanskrit itself, the last ‘a’ is always articulated as a short vowel.

Conjunct Consonants

The 7th limb of Ashtanga Yoga is Dhyana – Meditation. It is pronounced as ‘dhyA-na’.

The first syllable is an example of a ‘conjunct consonant’ – two consonants yoked together with no vowel in between. Some conjunct consonants are easy to say, e.g. ‘ma-tsya’ (fish) and ‘pa-dma’ (lotus). But others, like dhyA-na, are hard. There is a temptation to insert a vowel in between, like ‘dhi-yA-na’. Learning to say the conjuncts without the vowel will improve your Sanskrit pronunciation greatly. Another one to practice is ‘swA-dhyA-ya.

Differing Asana Names

One final thing that is of relevance in this context: what to do when you encounter two different names for a yoga posture, or the same name referring to two different yoga postures? While most asana names are common among yoga lineages, there are some differences.

For example, the Wheel pose is called **Chakrasana** by some, and **Urdhva Dhanurasana** by others. Each name gives an accurate, evocative, visual description of the pose. Chakra means wheel; it is easy to see why the pose resembles a wheel. Urdhva Dhanus means upward facing bow. Again, you can see how this is evocative of the spinal extension in this pose.

Sometimes, different poses have the same name. **Ardha Chandrasana** – Half Moon Pose – is used to indicate a standing sideways bend by some; others use the name to indicate a balancing triangle pose.

So which one is the “official” name? Neither, or both, depending on how you look at it! The name of a posture reflects the specific intuition and attunement of that teacher. The tradition of yoga, which has been transmitted by teacher to student, is based on intuition and experience; it doesn’t lend itself well to a rigid scheme of classification and rules. Instead of debating about the correct name, it is much better to practice the pose so that you can feel the truth of all names through direct experience.

Pronunciation Reference

In the tables below, a pronunciation guide is given for each Sanskrit term. The following convention is used:

1. Long vowels are written in upper-case, e.g. 'A'. Short vowels are written in lower-case, e.g. 'a'
2. The letter 'h' after a consonant is used to indicate aspiration, except in the case of 's' and 'c'
3. 'c' is like the 'c' in 'cat'; 'ch' is like 'chart'; 's' is like 'sip'; 'sh' is like 'shout'

Asana Names

Sanskrit	Pronunciation	English	Notes
Ananda	A-nun-da	Divine Joy, Bliss	
Asana	A-sa-na	Posture	Commonly mispronounced as 'a-sA-na'
Hatha	ha-tha	Forceful	The aspirated 't' makes this forceful! 'ha' means sun, 'tha' means moon. So Hatha Yoga also means the practice which balances the sun and moon aspects
Adho Mukha Shvanasana	a-dhO mu-kha shvA-nA-sa-na	Downward-Facing Dog Pose	'Shvana' means dog; don't confuse it with 'Shava', which means corpse.
Akarshana Dhanurasana	A-kar-sha-na dha-nu-rA-sa-na	Pulling-the-Bow Pose	
Ardha Chandrasana	ar-dha chan-drA-sa-na	Half Moon Pose	The first 'a' in both words is short. Also, the 'c' is like 'chart', not like 'shout'.
Ardha Matsyendrasana	ar-dha ma-tsEn-drA-sa-na	Half Spinal Twist	The first 'a' is short. 'Ardha' means 'half'. You will see it in other asana names
Baddha Konasana	ba-ddha kO-nA-sa-na	Bound Angle Pose (also Butterfly Pose)	'Kona' means 'angle. You will see this as part of several other asana names
Bakasana	ba-kA-sa-na	Crane Pose	
Balasana	bA-lA-sa-na	Child Pose	This is commonly pronounced with a short first 'a'. In Sanskrit, 'ba-la' means strength, while 'bA-la' means child. A short first 'a' makes it 'Strength Pose instead of 'Child's Pose'!

Bhujangasana	bhu-jun-gA-sa-na	Cobra Pose	The aspiration on the first syllable will make your Sanskrit very authentic
Chakrasana	cha-krA-sa-na	Circle Pose (also Wheel Pose)	Rolling the 'r' a little bit gives it a good 'Sanskrit quality'. Also, the 'c' is like 'chart', not like 'shout'
Dhanurasana	dha-nu-rA-sa-na	Bow Pose	
Ganapatiasana	ga-na-pa-ti-A-sa-na	Ganesha's Pose	'Ganas' refers to the retinue of Shiva; 'pati' and 'isha' both mean 'Lord of'. Thus 'Ganapati' and 'Ganesha' both mean 'Lord of (Shiva's) Hosts'
Garudasana	ga-ru-dA-sa-na	Eagle Pose (also Twisted Pose)	
Gomukhasana	gO-mu-khA-sa-na	Face of Light Pose	
Halasana	ha-lA-sa-na	Plow Pose	
Janushirasana	jA-nu-shi-rA-sa-na	Head-to-the-Knee Pose	
Jathara Parivartanasana	ja-tha-ra pa-ri-var-ta-nA-sa-na	Supine Twist	The aspirated 't' in the first word and the rolled 'r's give this name a good 'Sanskrit quality'
Karnapirasana	kar-na-pl-dA-sa-na	Ear-Closing Pose	
Matsyasana	ma-tsya-sa-na	Fish Pose	
Muktasana	muk-tA-sa-na	Freedom Pose	
Natarajasana	na-ta-rA-jA-sa-na	Dancing Shiva Pose (also King-of-the-Dance Pose)	Notice the 'raja' in the middle of this name. This is the same as 'raja' in 'Raja Yoga', 'Raja Kapotasana', etc. In all cases, the meaning is 'royal' or 'king'
Navasana	na-vA-sa-na	Boat Pose	Stress the 'v' as if it were German or Dutch
Padahastasana	pA-da-ha-stA-sa-na	Jackknife Pose (also Hand-to-Foot Pose, Standing Forward Bend)	
Padmasana	pa-dmA-sa-na	Lotus Pose	
Parighasana	pa-ri-ghA-sa-na	Gate Pose	

Parsvakonasana	pA-rshva-kO-nA-sa-na	Side Angle Pose	
Parvatasana	pa-rva-tA-sa-na	Seated Mountain Pose	
Parsvotanasana	pAr-shvO-ttAnA-sa-na	Side Stretching Pose (also Pyramid pose)	Many long vowels – say it long and see how it is a metaphor for the stretch in the pose. The first ‘s’ is pronounced like ‘shout’
Paschimotanasana	pa-shchi-mO-ttA-nA-sa-na	Posterior Stretching Pose	The first ‘s’ is pronounced like ‘shout’
Pavanamuktasana	pa-va-na-mu-ktA-sa-na	Wind-Freeing Pose	Note the appearance of ‘mukta’ in this word. This is the same as what appears in ‘muktasana’, and it means ‘Freedom’
Pincha Mayurasana	pin-cha ma-yU-rA-sa-na	Peacock Feather Pose	‘ch’ doesn’t indicate aspiration; rather, it is a clue to pronounce it like ‘chart’, not ‘cart’
Prasarita Padotanasana	pra-sA-ri-ta pA-dO-ttA-nA-sa-na	Wide-Stance Forward Bend	‘uttana’ means an intense, or deep, stretch. This appears in several asanas in this list. Can you find them all? (Hint: there are four)
Purvotanasana	pU-rvO-ttA-nA-sa-na	Front-Stretching Pose	Notice how all the ‘uttana’ poses have many long vowels. Deep stretch, anyone?
Rajakapotasana	rA-ja ka-pO-tA-sa-na	Royal Pigeon Pose	
Salabhasana	sha-la-bhA-sa-na	Locust Pose	The first ‘s’ pronounced like ‘shout’
Sarvangasana	sar-vAn-gA-sa-na	Shoulder Stand	
Sasamgasana	sa-sAm-gA-sa-na	Hare Pose	
Savasana	sha-vA-sa-na	Corpse Pose	The first ‘s’ pronounced like ‘shout’
Setu Bandhasana	se-tu ban-dhA-sa-na	Bridge Pose	
Siddhasana	si-ddhA-sa-na	Perfect Pose	
Simhasana	sim-hA-sa-na	Lion Pose	It is important to articulate the ‘h’ as you say it. Don’t glide over it, like ‘simmasana’.
Sirhasana	shi-rshA-sa-na	Headstand	
Supta Vajrasana	sU-ptA-va-jrA-sa-na	Supine Firm Pose	‘supta’ means supine. Like ‘parshva’ (side) and ‘ardha’ (half), it is used to prefix asana names

Surya Namaskar	sUr-ya na-ma-skA-ra	Sun Salutations	
Tadasana	tA-dA-sa-na	Standing Mountain Pose	Notice the long first and second 'a'. If you make only the second 'a' long, you get the common mispronunciation: tadAsana
Tola Trikonasana	tO-la tri-kO-nA-sa-na	Balancing Triangle Pose	'kona' means angle. Like 'raja' and 'uttana', it is present in many asana names. Can you find other asanas in this list which have 'kona' in them? (Hint: there are four)
Trikonasana	tri-kO-nA-sa-na	Triangle Pose	Commonly mis-pronounced with a short 'o'.
Upavistha Konasana	upa-vi-sh-ta kO-nA-sa-na	Seated Angle Pose	The first 's' is pronounced like 'shout'
Ustrasana	ush-trA-sa-na	Camel Pose	The first 's' is pronounced like 'shout'
Utkatasana	u-tka-tA-sa-na	Chair Pose	
Vajrasana	va-jrA-sa-na	Firm Pose (also Thunderbolt Pose, Diamond Pose)	
Vasishtasana	va-si-shthA-sa-na	Vasishta's Pose	
Viparita Karani	vi-pa-rl-ta ka-ra-ni	Simple Inverted Pose	
Virabhadrasana	vl-ra—bha-drA-sa-na	Warrior Pose	The aspiration of 'bha' at the center of this word adds a lot of power to the name.
Vrikasana	vri-kA-sa-na	Tree Pose	
Yoga Mudra	yO-ga mu-dra	Symbol of Yoga	

Pranayama Names

Sanskrit	Pronunciation	English	Notes
Pranayama	prA-nA-yA-ma	Energy Control	Commonly translated as Breath Control. Notice the long 'a's
Bhastrika	bha-stri-ka	Bellows Breath	The first 'a' is short!
Chandra Bheda	chun-dra bhE-da	Lunar Breath	
Dirgha	dIrgha		The 'I' is long. 'Dirgha' literally means long; so when you say this with a long 'I', it expresses the intent of the pranayama very well
Kapalabhati	ka-pa-la-bhA-ti	Breath of fire	
Nadi Shodhanam	nA-di shO-dha-nam	Alternate Nostril Breathing	'nadi's are the channels through which energy flows
Sitali	si-tA-li	Cooling Breath	
Sitakari	si-ta-kA-ri	Hissing Breath	
Surya Bheda	sUr-ya bhE-da	Solar Breath	The word 'bheda' (pierce), like the words 'bandha' (lock) and 'baddha' (bound), has a certain quality which is best expressed by aspiration
Ujjai	u-jjA-yi	Victorious	There is a tendency to lengthen the 'u' and blend the last two syllables, to produce a sound like U-jai; try instead to keep the 'u' short, and articulate the last two syllables separately

Other Common Sanskrit Terms

Sanskrit	Pronunciation	English	Notes
Ananda	A-nun-da	Divine Joy, Bliss	
Asana	A-sa-na	Posture	Commonly mispronounced as 'a-sA-na'
Chakra	cha-kra	Wheel	Rolling the 'r' a little bit. Also, the 'c' is like 'chart', not like 'shout'
Muladhara	mU-lA-dhA-ra	Root, or Coccyx Center	Sometimes spelt as mooladhara; the 'oo' indicates a long 'u' sound.
Swadhisthana	swa-dhi-shtA-na	Sacral Center	The first 's' is like 'sip' and the second 's' is like 'shout'
Manipura	ma-ni-pu-ra	Lumbar Center	
Anahata	a-nA-ha-ta	Heart Center	Note where the long 'a' is!
Vishuddha	vi-shu-ddha	Throat, or Cervical Center	Aspirating the 'd' gives this a good 'Sanskrit quality'
Agya	a-gya	Spiritual Eye	The 'gya' sound is hard to transliterate. After the 'g', there is a slight nasal sound which quickly moves to the 'y', like it was 'g-nya'. You will see this written, rather opaquely, as 'jna'.
Sahasrara	sa-ha-srA-ra	Crown Center	Don't over-roll your 'r's on this.
Ashtanga	ash-tAn-ga	8-limbs or 8-parts.	Usually part of the phrase 'Ashtanga Yoga', the 8-Limbed Yoga The first syllable rhymes with the English word <i>hush</i>
Yama	ya-ma	The Controls	Both the 'a's should be short. Commonly mispronounced as 'yA-ma'
Niyama	ni-ya-ma	The Observances	Both the 'a's should be short. Commonly mispronounced as 'ni-yA-ma'

Pranayama	prA-nA-yA-ma	Energy Control	Commonly translated as Breath Control. Notice the long 'a's
Pratyahara	pra-tyA-hA-ra	Interiorization	
Dharana	dhA-ra-na	Concentration	
Dhyana	dhyA-na	Meditation	The first syllable is a 'conjunct consonant'. Avoid the temptation to insert a vowel in between, like 'dhi-yA-na'.
Samadhi	sa-mA-dhi	Absorption	Commonly mispronounced by dropping the aspiration on 'd'
Ahimsa	a-him-sa	Harmlessness	
Satya	sa-tya	Truthfullness	Commonly mispronounced as 'sA-tcha'
Asteya	A-stE-ya	Non-covetousness	Note that both the 'a' and the 'e' are long
Brahmacharya	bra-hma-cha-rya	Continence	
Aparigraha	a-pa-ri-gra-ha	Non-attachment	
Shoucha	shou-cha	Purity	
Santosha	san-tO-sha	Contentment	
Tapasya	ta-pa-sya	Austerity	Commonly mis-pronounced as 'ta-pA-sya'
Swadhyaya	swA-dhyA-ya	Introspection	The second syllable is a conjunct consonant. Beware of the tendency to drop the 'y'
Ishwara Pranidhana	I-shwa-ra prA-ni-dA-na	Openness to higher truths	A long, but essentially simple set of words. A good one to practice your vowel-length techniques on.

