

SACRED TEXTS

Sacred Mantras: Text, Meaning, Sound

*30 essential mantras in Devanāgarī and IAST, translated word by word, with their
exact source, context, guided pronunciation and practice*



मन्त्र

mantra

YOGIDE

Free sample

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teacher or medical advice. Questions: administration@lacangel.fr

Before you begin

At dusk in Rishikesh, the river carries sound. From Triveni Ghat and Parmarth Niketan, the evening aarti rises over the Ganga in bells, conch shells and voices. In the ashrams, students chant the peace invocation of the Upanishads before class. On the bridges, a sadhu repeats a divine name under his breath, the beads of a mala moving through his fingers. Mantra is not an exotic extra in Indian spiritual life: it is its daily sound.

This book gives you thirty mantras that a practitioner of yoga is likely to meet, in an ashram, a class, a temple or a book. For each one you will find:

1. the text in **Devanāgarī**, the script in which Sanskrit is usually printed in India today;
2. the **IAST transliteration** (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration), which lets you pronounce each syllable correctly;
3. a **word-by-word translation** in a table, so that you can see what each word means;
4. a **continuous translation**;
5. the **exact source** of the text, or an honest statement that the source is traditional and uncertain;
6. the **context** in which it is used, a **pronunciation guide** and a note on **practice**.

It rests on three commitments.

First, the texts are checked. Every Vedic, Upanishadic and Purāṇic text in this book was checked against a digital edition of the Sanskrit (GRETIL, the Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages; TITUS, the Thesaurus Indogermanischer Text- und Sprachmaterialien at Frankfurt; and, for the few later texts that these scholarly collections do not hold, the volunteer editions of sanskritdocuments.org), and the reference is given. Where a mantra is widely recited but we could not find a sure textual source, we say so plainly: "traditional source; textual reference uncertain". Popular claims that a modern verse "comes from the Vedas" are not repeated here.

Second, the translations are our own. Every translation in this book was written for Yogide from the Sanskrit. None is copied or adapted from a modern published translation. Mantras are notoriously hard to translate; where a word can be read in several ways, the table says so.

Third, the traditions are respected. Some mantras are sung freely by anyone, in the street and at the riverside. Others are, in their own tradition, received from a teacher in an initiation (dīkṣā). Some belong to Buddhism, not to Hinduism. This book says, for each mantra, what the tradition says about who chants it and how. It does not promise powers, cures or results.

About health.

Chanting is a gentle practice. One study is often quoted on the subject: in 2001, Luciano Bernardi and colleagues found that reciting the Ave Maria in Latin or a yoga mantra slowed breathing to about six breaths per minute in their volunteers and changed cardiovascular rhythms in the same way (BMJ, 2001; see Sources). That is what it measured, and no more. This book makes no health claims. If you have a

breathing or heart condition, chant softly and without forcing the breath.

How to use this book

- **To learn a mantra.** Read the chapter on pronunciation first (Chapter 2). Then, for the mantra you have chosen, read the word-by-word table aloud, slowly, then the whole line. Repeat it daily for a week before moving on.
- **To understand what you already chant.** Look the mantra up in the contents: you will find its source, its meaning and how it is used.
- **To build a practice.** Chapter 9 gathers the mantras that open and close a practice, and Chapter 12 ends with three short sequences; Chapter 10 explains japa with a mala of 108 beads; Chapter 11 introduces kirtan.

Chapter 1. What a mantra is

The word

Mantra (मन्त्र) is formed from the root man, "to think", and the suffix -tra, which forms the names of instruments. A mantra is, literally, "an instrument of thought": a formula that is thought, spoken or sung in order to act on the mind and, in the traditional view, on the world. Indian grammarians and commentators also played with another etymology, mananāt trāyate, "it protects (trā) through reflection (man)". That is a traditional interpretation, not historical linguistics, but it tells you how the tradition sees mantra: a protection for those who repeat it with attention.

Three great families

The thirty mantras of this book come from three different worlds.

Family	Language and form	Examples in this book
Vedic	Verses (ṛc) and formulas (yajus) of the Vedas, composed in Vedic Sanskrit, chanted with pitch accents	Gāyatrī (2), Mahāmṛtyuñjaya (3), Gaṇānām tvā (17), Pāvakā naḥ (21), and the Upanishadic peace mantras (7 to 11)
Purāṇic and devotional	Verses of the epics, Purāṇas and later devotional literature, in classical Sanskrit; names of deities with namaḥ	Om namo bhagavate vāsudevāya (22), Sarvamaṅgalamāṅgalye (26), Gurur brahmā (16)
Tantric and bīja	Short syllables ("seeds", bīja) and formulas of the tantric traditions, Hindu and Buddhist, usually given in initiation	Bīja of the cakras (25), Om maṇi padme hūṃ (28)

There is a fourth group, less ancient but very present in yoga classes: verses whose author and source are unknown, but which became part of everyday practice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu belongs here. These verses are beautiful and sincere; they are simply not Vedic, and we will not pretend they are.

What the texts say about the power of sound

The Upanishads already make the syllable om the support of meditation: the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad identifies it with the whole of what was, is and will be (see Chapter 3). Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras say that Īśvara is designated by the praṇava, that is om (YS 1.27), and that its repetition, with reflection on its meaning, is a practice (YS 1.28): taj-japas tad-artha-bhāvanam. Two words in this sutra summarise the whole of mantra practice: japa, repetition, and bhāvana, cultivating the meaning.

That is the spirit of this book. A mantra repeated without understanding is still a sound; a mantra whose words you know becomes a meditation.

Dīkṣā: when a mantra is received

In many Indian traditions, certain mantras are not learned from a book but received from a teacher (guru) in an initiation (dīkṣā). The teacher whispers the mantra to the disciple, often with instructions about how many times and when to repeat it. This is the rule, for example, for the personal mantra given in many Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta lineages, for most bīja mantras of the tantric traditions and, in orthodox Brahmanical practice, for the Gāyatrī, which is traditionally imparted during the sacred thread ceremony (upanayana).

Other mantras are, by their very nature, public: the divine names sung in kirtan, the peace invocations recited by a whole class, the prayer before meals. For each mantra, this book tells you which is the case. Where a tradition reserves a mantra for initiates, we present its text and meaning for study, as countless printed books in India do, and we tell you how the tradition itself treats it. The decision is then yours, and if a mantra calls you strongly, the most traditional answer is to seek a teacher.

Chapter 1 recap

- Mantra = "instrument of thought"; the tradition also reads it as "what protects through reflection".
- Vedic, Purāṇic, tantric and modern mantras are different in age, language and use.
- Patañjali defines the practice in two words: japa (repetition) and bhāvana (cultivating the meaning).
- Some mantras are public; others are received in initiation. Each card says which.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 45 pages.

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