

Lesson 1.A

Sanskrit is written in **devanāgarī** script. The word **devanāgarī** means the ‘city (nāgarī) of immortals (deva)’. There are no capital letters. In Sanskrit, each letter represents one, and only one, sound. In English, the letter ‘a’ for example, may indicate many sounds (e.g. fat, fate, fare, far), but not so in Sanskrit.

The alphabet is systematically arranged according to the structure of the mouth. It is essential to use the correct mouth position and not to merely imitate an approximation of the sound. Without this, the development of the alphabet and the euphonic combinations that occur in continuous speech, will not be understood.

There are two fundamental divisions to the alphabet: the vowel (**svara**) and the consonant (**vyañjana**). The word **svara** literally means sound, tone, accent; and **vyañjana** an adornment or decoration (to the sound), manifesting (as a stop in the sound).

1.A.1 Vowel Measures

Vowels can be short (**hrasva**) or long (**dīrgha**) or prolonged (**pluta**). The short vowels are held for one measure (**mātrā**), the long vowels for two measures, and the prolonged for three or more measures.

This system of enumeration (one, two, many, where many means more than two) manifests throughout the grammar, and indeed throughout the systems of thought expressed in Sanskrit, for it reflects the natural evolution of creation.

The prolonged measure occurs in Vedic Sanskrit but is rare in Classical Sanskrit; the prolonged measure (as a full breath) is useful in practising the vowels. The prolonged measure in both transliterated Roman script and **devanagari** is indicated by the short vowel followed by the numeral 3. (You may also see it as the long vowel followed by 3.)

1.A.2 Sanskrit Pronunciation

The pronunciation of Sanskrit is very simple: you open the mouth wide and move the tongue and lips as necessary: the tongue and lips are almost pure muscle and have little inertia or resistance to movement. By contrast, the pronunciation of English requires much effort, for we barely open the mouth (which means that all sounds are indistinct or blurred), and then instead of simply moving the tongue we move the whole jaw—and what a great weight that is to move about. Having

become well practised in speaking with a moving jaw, it does require some attention to break that habit and speak with a moving tongue.

The biggest single factor in practising the refined sounds of Sanskrit, is to open the mouth! For English, the mouth opens to a mere slit of about 6-mm (a pencil thickness); for Sanskrit this needs to increase fourfold—literally! Try this out for yourself: with the mouth opened to a slit, sound a prolonged **a₃** and slowly open the mouth wide and listen to the change in the quality, to the richness and fulness that emerges. The mouth needs to open a lot more than you think—so don't think!—use a measure, like two fingers.

1.A.3 The Three Primary Vowels: a i u

The sounding of **a₃** is simplicity itself: with body and mind relaxed but alert, open the throat and mouth wide, and with tongue relaxed, breathe out and simply desire that the vocal cords vibrate. What could be more natural than that?

This sound is central to all the vowel sounds; indeed, the whole alphabet is simply an embellishment of this sound.

As a very rough guide, the short **a** sounds similar to the vowel in 'but' and definitely NOT 'bat'; likewise the long **ā** is similar to the vowel in 'harm' and NOT 'ham'. In producing the short **a** there is a slight tensioning in the throat; that tension should not be there for the long **ā** or the prolonged **a₃**. In spite of this difference between **a** and **ā**, they are treated as though the same in the rules of **sandhi** (euphonic combination) of the grammar.

To sound **i₃**, open the mouth as for **a₃** and raise the back of the tongue (the tip should be relaxed behind the bottom front teeth). In producing this sound it will be noticed that there is a slight constriction or tensioning in the throat as compared with the relaxed throat when sounding **a₃**.

To sound **u₃**, allow the lips to form a small circular opening of the mouth (so that the moistened back of a pencil just slips in and out, filling the opening); there should be no tension in the lips or face muscles, so pout rather than purse the lips. There will be a similar tension in the throat as for **i₃**.

The short **i** sounds similar to the vowel in 'pink' and NOT 'pin', and the long **ī** like 'peep' or 'seat'; the short **u** is similar to the vowel in 'put' or 'soot', and the long **ū** like 'boot' or 'suit'.

1.A.4 The Other Simple Vowels: **ṛ** **ḷ**

To get to the correct pronunciation of **ṛ**, begin by sounding a prolonged **i** and slowly raise the tip of the tongue so that it is pointing to the top of the head, approaching but not touching the roof of the mouth. Do not try to hold the back of the tongue in the **i** position, nor try to move it out of that position: simply have no concern with what is happening at the back of the tongue, just attend to the tip of the tongue and listen. Repeat the exercise a few times until comfortable with the sound of **ṛ**, then practise directly sounding **ṛ** for a full breath.

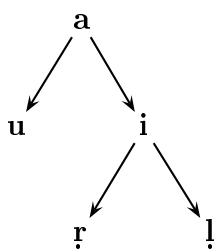
Similarly for **ḷ**, start sounding with a prolonged **i** and slowly raise the tip of the tongue to behind the upper front teeth without touching them. Continue the exercise as for **ṛ**.

These vowels appear to have vanished from popular speech, and the memory of how to pronounce them has faded. The **paṇḍit** of today tends to pronounce **ṛ** as if it were **ri**, and **ḷ** even more improbably as **rī**; similarly **ḷ** and **ḹ** tend to be pronounced as **li** and **lī**. This accounts for the transliteration scheme found in the dictionary. In fact the vocalic **ṛ** is still present in Eastern European languages and you may come across surnames like Przybylski; it is also present in English in some pronunciations of the word ‘interesting’ as ‘int’r’sting’ or ‘intr̥sting’, or indeed in the American ‘pṛdy’ for ‘pretty’.

The long **ḹ** is not used in the standard grammar, and **ḷ** occurs only in one verb (**klp**, to manage, to be well ordered or regulated).

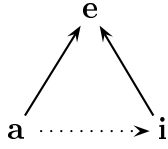
In practice, when either of these vowels is followed by a consonant whose mouth position requires that the tip of the tongue be at a lower position, a vestigial **i** will emerge due to the bunching of the muscle at the back of the tongue when moving the tip downwards, for example **ṛk** tends to produce **ṛⁱk**, but a word like **Kṛṣṇa** should produce no **i** sound at all.

1.A.5 The Compound Vowels: **e ai o au**



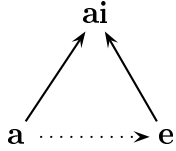
Let’s examine what we have so far. We began with **a** and from this developed **u** and **i** to give the three primary vowels, and then the **i** gave rise to **ṛ** and **ḷ**. These five basic vowels, each having its own unique mouth position, define the five mouth positions used for the whole alphabet.

Further vowels are derived by combining the **a** sound with **i** and **u** to form the four compound vowels (**sandhyakṣara**).



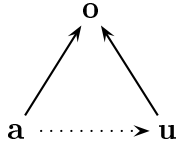
The **e** sound arises when **a** is sounded through the **i** mouth position. Remember that **a** has a relaxed throat and tongue, while **i** has the back of the tongue raised and the throat tense: so relaxing the throat while retaining the back of the tongue raised will produce **e**.

The vowel **e** sounds similar to that in ‘fair’ or ‘eight’.



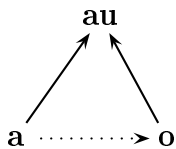
The **ai** sound arises when **e** is further combined with **a** as it were. Now the only difference between **e** and **a** is the raised back of the tongue, so to move from **e** towards the **a** sound, we need to drop the back of the tongue to a position half way between that used for **i** and **e** and the relaxed position used for **a**.

The **ai** sounds similar to the vowel in ‘aisle’ or ‘pie’; there should be no glide or slide in the sound from **a** to **i**.



In a manner similar to the arising of **e**, when **a** is sounded through the **u** mouth position, i.e. with the lips in the position for **u** but the throat relaxed for sounding **a**, the sound **o** naturally arises.

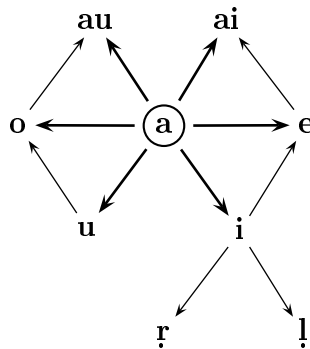
The vowel **o** should sound between ‘awe’ and ‘owe’ (or between the vowel sounds in ‘corn’ and ‘cone’); the ideal is that point where the sound could be taken as either of the two English sounds.



And finally, the **au** sound arises when **a** is combined with **o**, so that the position of the lips is roughly half way between that used for **u** and **a**, and the throat is relaxed.

The **au** sounds similar to the vowel in ‘down’ or ‘hound’ but without the glide from **a** to **u**.

1.A.6 Summary of All Vowels



Combining the previous five sketches illustrates the central role played by the **a** sound.

Note that all these vowel sounds may be sounded continuously for a full breath: there is no glide from one sound to another. Also note that the four sounds **e ai o au**, being an addition of two sounds as it were, are naturally long (**dīrgha**) and may also be prolonged (**pluta**), but have no short measure.

Vowel	Throat	Tongue	Lips	Eng. Approx.†
a	tense	relaxed	wide open	<u>but</u> , NOT <u>bat</u>
ā	relaxed	relaxed	wide open	<u>harm</u> , NOT <u>ham</u>
i / ī	tense	raised back	wide open	<u>pink</u> / <u>peep</u>
e	relaxed	raised back	wide open	<u>fair</u> or <u>eight</u>
ai	relaxed	half-raised back	wide open	<u>aisle</u> or ' <u>pie</u> '
u / ū	tense	relaxed	small circle	<u>put</u> / <u>boot</u>
o	relaxed	relaxed	small circle	between <u>owe</u> <u>awe</u>
au	relaxed	relaxed	large circle	<u>down</u> or <u>hound</u>
r̄	tense	half-raised back, tip vertical	wide open	(<u>acre</u>)
l̄	tense	half-raised back, tip upper teeth	wide open	(<u>table</u>)

† The English approximations are only a very rough guide, especially considering the wide variety of accents around the world. Rather follow the instructions given earlier, or oral guidance given in person.

1.A.7 The Sixteen śakti: aṃ aḥ

To these fourteen vowels are added the **anusvāra** and **visarga** to form what are called the sixteen **mātrkā** or **śakti** (powers or energies). The **anusvāra** (ṃ) is an ‘after sound’, a nasal sound following a vowel. It is sounded through the nose only, and should be independent of mouth position. Later on we shall consider how it may be substituted by a nasal consonant depending on the following letter. The **visarga** (ḥ), or **visarjanīya**, is an unvoiced breath following a vowel, and is breathed through the mouth position of that vowel. Some traditions append an echo of the vowel after the breath, so that **aḥ** may be sounded as **aḥ^a**, etc.

Strictly speaking, the **anusvāra** and **visarga** are not part of the alphabet inasmuch as they arise only through the rules of **sandhi** (euphonic combination). Since these both arise after a vowel we shall precede them with **a** when sounding the sixteen **śakti**, which form the start of the alphabetical order, i.e.:

a ā i ī u ū ṛ ṝ ḷ ḹ e ai o au aṃ aḥ

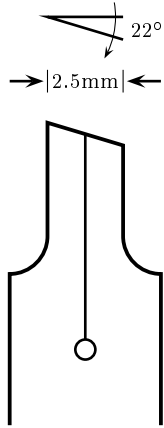
In the transliteration scheme shown above, the lines and dots, called ‘diacritical marks’, are used because the Sanskrit alphabet has more letters than the English alphabet. Diacritics are combined with Roman letters to represent new sounds, for example the macron (horizontal bar above the letter) is used to indicate the long (**dīrgha**) version of the vowel.

1.A.8 Practising the Alphabet

One way of memorizing the script is by writing it: look at the form of the letter, sound it, and then write it. In this exercise it is important to associate the sound with the form. When you write the letter, write the whole letter without referring back to the original. If, half way through, you forget how to continue the letter, then start again: and do not continue with that half-completed letter. Remember that the exercise is not simply to copy the original form, but to associate a sound with a whole form, so do not practise half letters. When the shape has become familiar then time can be spent refining the proportions of the letter.

Another method of practising the alphabet is to use flash cards with the **devanāgarī** letter on one side and the transliterated Roman letter on the other (in case you forget you can turn over). These cards can also be used in the other direction: from the transliterated Roman letter, see if you can visualize the **devanāgarī** form. In fact, there needs to be a three way association, namely between both the written forms and the sound, so that any one of these associates with the other two.

The ideal way of becoming familiar with these sounds and letters is to spend 15–20 minutes each day on the written exercise, and one minute at a time 15–20 times throughout the day with the flash cards.



Pens with nibs pre-ground to the correct angle are not generally available, so start with an inexpensive calligraphy fountain pen (Schaeffer, Platignum, etc.) and file the end of the nib to 22° as shown. File across the nib (in the sketch, into the paper) and finally remove the sharp edges by ‘writing’ on 1000-grit water paper on a firm flat surface.

You will find that a broad nib ($\approx 2.5\text{mm}$) is best for practising the forms of the letters, and a much narrower nib ($\approx 0.6\text{mm}$) for normal writing. As a very rough guide the nib width should be $\frac{1}{8}$ of the overall height of the अ character, and the thickness of the nib about $\frac{1}{6}$ of the width.

Here are the first six **devanāgarī** characters to practise. They are the short (**hrasva**) and long (**dīrgha**) measures of the three primary vowels.

The transliteration of the first row is **a ā**, the second **i ī**, and the third **u ū**.



Lesson 1.B

Note: Until you are familiar with the pronunciation of the consonants (given in the next lesson), do not attempt to pronounce the Sanskrit words included in the text: this will save the unnecessary labour of unlearning the incorrect pronunciation.

1.B.1 The Concept of Dhātu

A **dhātu** is a rudimentary verbal element from which words are derived: it is the nucleus to which other word fragments are added to form a whole word.

Consider the English verb ‘to stand’. Prefixes may be added to this to form further verbs, such as ‘misunderstand’, or suffixes may be added to form nouns and adjectives, such as ‘standard’; indeed, a host of words may be derived from ‘stand’, such as constant, constitution, stagnant, instant, static, estate, extant, ecstatic, etc.

But a **dhātu** or root is even more fundamental than a verb. The **dhātu** itself is not found in general speech or writing, and may be likened to the universal idea of a verbal activity, which diverges into many specific meanings, each of which is an aspect of that common universal idea.

To appreciate how ‘stand’ changes to ‘state’ for example, it would be necessary to study its etymological derivation from the Latin, and ultimately from its Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root $ST\bar{A}$, meaning ‘to stand, stand fast’. From this PIE root $ST\bar{A}$ are derived other simple English verbs, such as stay, stow, stack, stem, stammer.

The situation is a lot simpler in Sanskrit, for these fundamental roots are included in the language itself, and its grammar fully describes the development of words from the **dhātu** to its fully inflected form as found in sentences.

The PIE root $ST\bar{A}$ is allied to the Sanskrit **dhātu sthā**, which has the sense of ‘cessation or absence of movement’, and thus the simple verb derived from the **dhātu sthā** may be translated as ‘to stand’. Monier-Williams’ dictionary gives several dozen English words that may be used in translating the verb: to stand, stay, remain, continue, be intent upon, make a practice of, keep on, persevere, endure, last, adhere to, stand still, stay quiet, remain stationary, stop, halt, wait, tarry, linger, hesitate, rely on, confide in, desist, be left alone, etc. — all these express some sense of ‘cessation or absence of movement’, which is the sense of the meaning of the **dhātu sthā** given in the **Dhātu-Pāṭha** (lit. ‘recitation of roots’), which is a list of roots (about 2000 of them) giving grammatical information about their inflection, together with a concise sense of their universal meaning.

1.B.2 Introduction to Verbs

A **dhātu** (indicated with a surd or root symbol ‘√’ before it) develops to form a stem (**aṅga**), and to the stem is added a personal ending (**tiñ-vibhakti**) to form a complete verb (**kriyā**). For example:

dhātu	(root)	√ sthā	sense of ‘cessation or absence of movement’
aṅga	(stem)	tiṣṭha	to stand
kriyā	(verb)	tiṣṭhati	he/she/it stands

As in English, there are three persons (**puruṣa**): the first person (**prathama-puruṣa**), middle person (**madhyama-puruṣa**), last person (**uttama-puruṣa**). The word **uttama** derives from **ud-** (up) and **-tama** (superlative suffix) to mean best, uppermost, or highest, so that **uttama-puruṣa** can also mean Supreme Spirit; however, in a series of place or time or order, as we have here, it means ‘last’. In Sanskrit the personal ending of the verb changes according to **puruṣa**, to give the singular (**eka-vacana**) forms:

prathama-puruṣa	tiṣṭhati	he/she/it stands
madhyama-puruṣa	tiṣṭhasi	you stand
uttama-puruṣa	tiṣṭhāmi	I stand

Note that the order is the reverse of that used in English.

In forming the stem (**aṅga**), the **dhātu** does not necessarily undergo as great a change as with √**sthā**, for example √**vad** remains clearly recognizable in the form **vadati** ‘he/she/it speaks’.

Some words, such as adverbs and conjunctions, do not have endings; these are called indeclinables (**avyaya**). An example of this is **ca** (‘and’) which is placed after the last word of the series it links (or after each word in the series).

With this limited vocabulary, simple sentences may be constructed:

vadāmi	I speak OR I am speaking.
tiṣṭhati vadāmi ca	He stands and I speak.
tiṣṭhasi vadasi ca	You stand and you speak, OR You stand and speak.

1.B.3 Exercises

A wealth of information is presented in these notes, but it is not at all necessary to learn all this or the Sanskrit technical terms: indeed, it is preferable NOT to learn them. The practical way to become familiar with the basics of Sanskrit is through practice: all the theory that is provided is simply so that the practice may be intelligent, and lead to understanding.

With this aim in mind, at the end of each lesson a few simple exercises are presented.

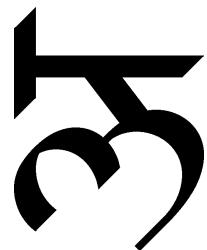
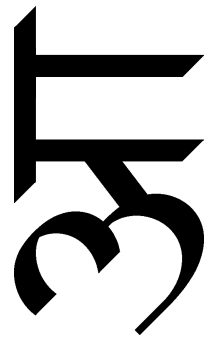
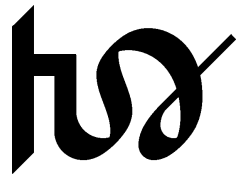
- (a) Practise sounding the sixteen **mātrkā** in their correct order, and writing them in Roman script.
- (b) Practise writing and recognizing the first six vowels in **devanāgarī**.
- (c) Look up the verb 'stand' in a good English dictionary and observe its wide range of meanings.
- (d) Translate the following sentences into English:
- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. tiṣṭhasi vadāmi ca | 4. tiṣṭhāmi vadati ca |
| 2. tiṣṭhati vadasi ca | 5. vadasi tiṣṭhāmi ca |
| 3. vadāmi tiṣṭhasi ca | 6. tiṣṭhāmi vadāmi ca |
- (e) Translate the following sentences into Sanskrit:
- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. He stands and I speak | 4. You speak and he stands |
| 2. You stand and he speaks | 5. I stand and he speaks |
| 3. You speak and I stand | 6. I speak and you stand |

1.B.4 Flash Cards

The next sheet has the flash cards for the first six vowels. Cut these out and start using them. Flash cards for the rest of the alphabet will be provided at appropriate places in the course. It would be useful to keep the flash cards in a box (for example a cigarette box): there will be a total of forty-nine cards for the alphabet, and a further ten for the numerals.



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