

# Recommendations for Learning Sanskrit Through Self-Study for Yoga Practitioners

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Most of the Hindu Yoga texts, such as the *Yoga-Sûtra*, *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, or *Hatha-Yoga-Pradîpikâ*, are written in the Sanskrit language. Thus, it is understandable that more serious students of Yoga would like to learn at least the rudiments of this sacred language in order to be able to obtain a more immediate understanding of the teachings of the great Yoga scriptures. Often, however, their enthusiasm for learning Sanskrit is dampened by the relative unavailability of suitable grammars for beginners. While such grammars, as I will show, do exist, they are not always easy to locate. The purpose of this short overview, then, is to comment on some of the available publications intended for self-study.

I begin with ***Sanskrit: The Language of the Ancient Scriptures—A Home Study Course*** authored by Pandit Rajmani Tigunait and Kamla Dubey, published by the Himalayan Institute Press in 2005, for the simple reason that this is quite simply the best introductory text for learning Sanskrit from the perspective of a Yoga practitioner. This course consists of a large-size 512-page volume and six CDs. It commends itself for the following reasons: (1) The materials are well organized taking the student step by step, just at the right pace, into the ins and outs of Sanskrit grammar; (2) there is enough repetition to refresh the student's memory and make the various lessons "stick," which is often missing from other books and courses; (3) already with the second lesson, the student, who is naturally eager to apply his or her newly gained grammatical knowledge, is given the opportunity to form simple sentences; (4) the audio recordings are of a high quality, and Pandit Tigunait's enunciation of the Sanskrit sounds is not only predictably correct but also clear; (5) all exercises have an answer key, which is especially important when the course, as in the present case, does not include tuition, though apparently tuition is available separately; (6) the course is geared toward Yoga and allows the student to systematically build up a useful vocabulary; (7) the *deva-nâgarî* font is big enough and easy to read. There is only one drawback, which is the price of the course. At US \$400, some students may find this too steep, though I hasten to add that this well-designed course is well worth every penny. The two authors deserve high praise for creating a truly user-friendly Sanskrit home study course for tyros.

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For those who cannot afford the above home study course, I can recommend Thomas Egenes's two-volume work ***Introduction to Sanskrit***, published by Motilal Banarsidass in 1996 in a second, revised edition and in 2005 (volume 2) respectively. Although this publisher is located in Delhi, the work is distributed in the United States by South Asia Books in Columbia, Montana (573-474-0116). The author apparently also has published separately a Sanskrit workbook, flash cards, and video tapes. He is a professor at the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa, and can be reached by email at [tegenes@mum.edu](mailto:tegenes@mum.edu). In his Introduction to the first volume, the author articulates my own sentiments when he writes: "Even a little Sanskrit will give you control over English translations of the Sanskrit literature, so you will be able to decide if a crucial word has been mistranslated. While you may not become an expert translator of the Sanskrit literature, you'll find that an introductory knowledge of Sanskrit has great worth" (p.xi).

Prof. Egenes understands his work as a “pre-primer,” which seeks to make the study of Sanskrit “simple, concise, and systematic” and therefore also “more accessible and enjoyable” (p. xii). I believe he has succeeded in meeting his goals. His introductory grammar is well structured, proceeds in adequately small steps, and with a good balance between alphabet, grammar, and vocabulary. He allows seven lessons for the assimilation of the *deva-nāgarī* script, the first six lessons using both the *deva-nāgarī* script and its transliteration. The complicated rules for combining Sanskrit sounds (known as *sandhi*), which he leaves for later chapters and which he introduces in convenient chart form. On the other hand, he furnishes the student from with enough vocabulary and simple grammatical rules to form simple sentences from the outset. Answers to exercises are given at the end of volume 1. The vocabulary provided piece by piece is designed to eventually allow the student to read the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Rāmāyana*. The first volume can be purchased independently, and the second volume consists in more advanced grammatical teachings based on readings from the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. When I last checked on South Asia Books’ web site, volume 1 was US \$20.00 and volume 2 US \$21.50—a fraction of the previously reviewed home study course.

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The third introductory grammar to Sanskrit I would like to recommend is Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman’s ***Devavânîpraveśikā: An Introduction to the Sanskrit Language***, published in a third revised edition by the Center for South Asia Studies in Berkeley, California, in 2004. As already the main title of this book suggests, it is geared toward a more academic readership.

Acknowledging the limitations of the usual teachings materials in university courses on Sanskrit, the authors set out to create a more user-friendly primer. This book is meant to be used in a classroom situation and provide enough grammatical fodder for first-year Sanskrit students (20 weeks), though seems to be more suitable for second-year students. The primer is indeed superior to existing grammars, like those by Whitney, Perry, and even Coulson’s *Teach Yourself Sanskrit*. It is very systematic and comes with exercises (but without answer keys) and glossaries for each segment. The *deva-nāgarī* font used in the book is quite readable. University students, who have access to a teacher, will undoubtedly be appreciative. However, this is not a volume for self-study, unless the student is linguistically very gifted and also is familiar with philological terminology. Yet, it can serve as a convenient reference work for the intelligent autodidact as he or she makes progress in learning Sanskrit. This primer, which has 539 pages, is available from the Center for South Asia Studies at US \$55.00.

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I remember eagerly awaiting the arrival of Prof. Ashok Aklujkar’s work ***Sanskrit: An Easy Introduction to an Enchanting Language***, published in 2005 by Svadhyaya Publications, 5346 Opal Place, Richmond, B.C., Canada V7C 5B4. I thought that this course might be suitable for Yoga students who wish to acquaint themselves with Sanskrit at an introductory level. The author’s stated intent in producing this work was that it should be suitable for university students as well as autodidacts. The depth and breadth as well as the academic presentation of the course are, in my opinion, somewhat too demanding for self-study on a limited time budget. Many Yoga

practitioners live busy lives and, in my experience, can seldom commit to an intensive language course. Many also require perhaps more handholding than a course intended primarily for university students can accommodate.

This work comprises two large-size volumes in one and a third separate volume with a total of 608 pages) and five audio cassettes. The price is astonishingly low at CAN \$70.00/US \$70.00 (including shipping!), which I imagine barely covers printing and shipping. Prof. Aklujkar's Sanskrit course, which was put together and is sold entirely as a service (Karma-Yoga) to others, represents a truly amazing scholarly achievement. Despite my above-mentioned reservations, there is no question in my mind that it is **the single most outstanding Sanskrit grammar available today.**

Serious students of Sanskrit will find Prof. Aklujkar's work superior to other publications in terms of scope and detail. The author's love for and also mastery of Sanskrit is evident from every page. My above concerns notwithstanding, I can highly recommend it both as a **comprehensive grammar** and as a **reliable reference work** to all those who can allocate sufficient time to learning another language. For home study, it would have been useful to include English translations of the many short Sanskrit exercises, so that students who do not have access to a teacher can readily check their attempts at rendering Sanskrit into English. **Autodidacts can still benefit greatly from having this course on their shelves as a resource when other grammars prove incomprehensible or incomplete.** It might even tempt them to allow more time for their studies and delve deeper into Sanskrit.

Prof. Aklujkar's course includes audiorecordings on two CDs, and additional learning tools are in preparation.

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Having mentioned Michael Coulson's popular **Sanskrit** earlier, I should comment on the book as well. This 513-page paperback was issued in the famous *Teach Yourself* series first in 1976. I have on my shelves a copy of the 2003 edition, which was revised by Richard Gombrich and James Benson. While this grammar represents a valiant effort to make classical Sanskrit accessible to the autodidact, it does, as the author admits in his Preface, presume "a somewhat greater degree of sophistication in potential students of Sanskrit than in students proposing to teach themselves a language such as French" (p. x). In other words, it is designed for those who already have some knowledge of other languages like Latin or Greek. This naturally limits the book's usefulness and appeal.

Each lesson in Coulson's grammar includes exercises for which a key is provided at the end of the book and short glossaries. Some students, who have not yet mastered the *deva-nāgarī* will applaud the fact that after Chapter 6, the author stops using it and instead settles for transliteration. The tables of noun declensions and verb conjugations furnished in appendices also are enormously useful, as is the author's inclusion of seldom-discussed issues of Sanskrit style and composition. Among the drawbacks to be mentioned are (1) most learners of Sanskrit require a slower pace with more examples and explanations and fewer philological digressions; (2) in my copy of the book, the ligatures (sound combinations) of the *deva-nāgarī* font are hard to read and might present a beginning student with an insurmountable difficulty. As an additional reference

work on one's book shelves, Coulson's grammar is worth the investment of US \$18.95 (or about US \$7.00 for a second-hand copy).

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