

Chanting – Rules for correct pronunciation in chanting

Significance of marks above/below syllables/letters

In *Taittiriya Upanishad* we find:

ॐ शीक्षां व्याख्यास्यामः । वर्णः स्वरः । मात्रा बलम् । साम सन्तानः । इत्युक्तः शीक्षाध्यायः ॥
om śīkṣāṃ vyākhyāsyāmaḥ | varṇaḥ svaraḥ | mātrā balam | sāma santānaḥ | ityuktaḥ śīkṣādhyāyaḥ ||

‘Om, Let us explain śīkṣā, the doctrine of pronunciation (orthography) such as letter, varṇa; accent, svara; quantity, mātrā; effort, bala; modulation, sāma; and union of letters, santāna or sandhi. This is the lecture on śīkṣā, pronunciation’.

This is the first verse following the opening Invocation and it is interesting to note that the Rishi ends the verse with ‘ityuktaḥ śīkṣādhyāyaḥ, This is the lecture on pronunciation’; there was no other discourse in this Upanishad on śīkṣā!! Can you imagine this is the entire lecture, how would we as ‘modern day students’ react if our Guru/teacher left us with the above as the entire lecture/course on pronunciation, yes, we can all imagine?!!!

Our ancient Rishis imparted knowledge in ‘seed form’ and the first imparted knowledge are in what we now call Vedas, which were imparted to four Rishis by the Highest of all Rishis, God, during their state of deep meditation, shruti knowledge.

"Mananaat traayate iti mantra". That which protects (*traayate*) by constant repetition is a *Mantra*. *Mantras* are revelations in the most ancient language - *sanskrit*. They were heard by the ancient Masters or *Rishis* in their meditation (as direct revelations from God).

Dictionary.com defines a mantra as “a word or formula, as from the *veda*, chanted or sung as an incantation or prayer”. One must understand the difference between a *mantra/sloka*, a devotional chant or *kirtan* (*singing, such as bhajanas, etc.*) and *japa* (*repetition*). *Mantras* are from *Vedas/Upanishads*- impersonal and abstract like *Soham*, while *Shlokas* are *puranic* (*post vedic period, such as Bhagavad Gita*), may or may not involve a personal deity, like *Om Namo Narayana*. There are also *bija* or *seed mantras* like *Om Hrim Dum Durga Devyai Namaha*. All mantras have a *bija*, which is the heart of the mantra- it may or may not be revealed in the chant. *Kirtan* is singing praises of God and *japa* is repetition of a mantra (with or without telling beads). All *mantra, kirtan* or *japa* invoke different aspects of the One Infinite Reality.

Every science has its own laws and the abuse of these laws can create adverse effects. *Mantras* are powerful sound vibrations which are capable of transforming energy at all levels of creation. They affect the mental and subtle planes of consciousness and reach the subconscious level where our karmic patterns are stored. The practice/chanting, with pointed focus and thought, of *mantra* increases concentration, memory, purifies our heart and helps erase the effects of past *karma*. Proper recitation of *mantras* and chants helps invoke the latent power within us and can bless us in every facet of our life.

The most important thing to know, whether it is a *mantra* we are repeating or a chant we are singing, is – **proper pronunciation is the key**. Yes, we all have different accents – that is not a problem – however mispronunciation, at times, changes the meaning and nullifies the very effect we wish to produce. Therefore, we must strive for proper pronunciation (and understanding of the Mantra, which is not the focus in this compilation)!!!

The technical jargon or names of those 'marks' above or below a syllable/letter in mantras or slokas, which are used to provide proper notes/pitch in chanting are as follows:

- 1) Dīrgha Svarita (a.k.a Double Daṇḍa or Double vertical bars): pitch is raised AND dragged here two tones higher than normal pitch
- 2) (Hrasva) Svarita (a.k.a Single Daṇḍa or Single Vertical bar): pitch is raised here one tone higher than normal
- 3) Unmarked syllables, no change in the pitch = Udātta.
- 4) Horizontal line beneath a letter, here the pitch is dropped one level; this is = Anudātta

Whenever we have just bindu and no anuswara we must pronounce as "ng" and not "m"....only when we have bindu with anuswara we pronounce as "m". Ex: Purushang (with just bindu) and not Purusham.

As previously stated, *Taittiriya Upanishad* clearly points out 6 elements of pronunciation with regard to *vedic mantras*.

1. *Varna* or alphabet (or in general syllable)
2. *Svara* or intonation of each syllable
3. *Mātrā* or duration of uttering each syllable
4. *Balam* or stress/effort on each syllable
5. *Sāma* or the balance of chanting (the tune of entire mantra)
6. *Santāna* or the continuity in pronouncing

The five most common mistakes are:

1. Improper pronunciation
2. Improper stress on syllables
3. Incorrect meter
4. Not following rules specific to a particular mantra
5. Chanting certain mantras in random tunes

The oral tradition of the Vedas (Śrauta) consists of several **pathas**, "recitations" or ways of chanting the Vedic mantras. The various pathas or recitation styles are designed to allow the complete and perfect memorization of the text and its pronunciation, including the Vedic Pitch Accent. Eleven such ways of reciting the Vedas were designed - Samhita, Pada, Krama, Jata, Maalaa, Sikha, Rekha, Dhvaja, Danda, Rathaa, Ghana, of which Ghana is usually considered the most difficult.

The words of a mantra are strung together in different patterns like "vakya", "pada", "karma", "jata", "mala", "sikha", "rekha", "dhvaja", "danda", "ratha", "ghana". We call some Vedic scholars "ghanapathins", don't we? It means they have learnt the chanting of the scripture up to the advanced stage called "ghana". "Pathin" means one who has learnt the "patha".

In "vakyapatha" and "samhitapatha" the mantras are chanted in the original (natural) order, with no special pattern adopted. However, in the vakyapatha some words of the mantras are joined together in what is called "sandhi".

In padapatha each word in a mantra is clearly separated from the next. It comes next to samhitapatha and after it is kramapatha. In this the first word of a mantra is joined to the second, the second to the third, the third to the fourth, and so on, until we come to the final word.

In jata patha, the first word of the mantra is chanted with the second, then the order is reversed-the second is chanted with the first. Then, again, the first word is chanted with the second, then the second with the third, and so on. In this way the entire mantra is chanted, going back and forth. In sikhapatha the pattern consists of three words of a mantra, instead of the two of jata.

Ghanapatha is more difficult than these. There are four types in this method. Here also the words of a mantra are chanted back and forth and there is a system of permutation and combination in the chanting.

Samhitapatha and padapatha are called "prakrtipatha" (natural way of chanting) since the words are recited only once and in their natural order. The other methods belong to the "vikrtipatha" (artificial way of chanting) category. (In krama, though the words do not go in the strict natural order of one-two-three, etc, there is no reversal of the words-the first after the second, the second after the third, and so on. So it cannot be described fully as vikrtipatha).

Leaving out krama, there are eight vikrti patterns and they are recounted in the following verse which may be easily remembered.

*Jatā mālā sikhā rekhā dhvaja dando ratho ghānaḥ
Ityastau-vikrtayaḥ proktaḥ kramapurva maharṣibhiḥ*

All these different methods of chanting are meant to ensure the tonal and verbal purity of the Vedas for all time. In pada the words in their natural order, in krama two words together, in jata the words going back and forth. The words tally in all these methods of chanting and there is the assurance that the original form will not be altered.

Today, some sampradayams seem to place great emphasis on ghān pārāyanam, घण-पारायणम्. Public Rudra Ghana parayanam is fairly common these days and recitation of ghanam in weddings, and other ceremonies is almost a given in various parts of India if there is a Ghanapadi or two present!!

The benefits to be derived from the different ways of chanting are given in this verse.

Samhitapathamatreṇa yatphalam procyate budhaiḥ

Padu tu dviguṇam vidyāt krame tu ca caturguṇam

Varnakrame sataguṇam jatayantu sahasrakam

Further, some other Schools of Vedic Chanting Kaundiniya-Siksha (sloka 20 -27) seems to extol the manifold merits of reciting and hearing the more complex forms of vikrithi pathas over the samhitapatham, see Kaundiniya-Siksha (sloka 20 -27).

In summary, some of the forms of recitation are —

- The *jaṭā-pāṭha* (literally "mesh recitation") in which every two adjacent words in the text were first recited in their original order, then repeated in the reverse order, and finally repeated again in the original order. The recitation thus proceeded as:

word1word2, word2word1, word1word2; word2word3, word3word2, word2word3; ...

- In another form of recitation, *dhvaja-pāṭha* (literally "flag recitation") a sequence of *N* words were recited (and memorized) by pairing the first two and last two words and then proceeding as:

**word1word2, word(N-1)wordN; word2word3, word(N-3)word(N-2);;
word(N-1)wordN, word1word2;**

- The most complex form of recitation, *ghana-pāṭha* (literally "dense recitation"), according to Filliozat 2004, p. 139), took the form:

**word1word2, word2word1, word1word2word3, word3word2word1, word1word2word3;
word2word3, word3word2, word2word3word4, word4word3word2, word2word3word4; ...**

These methods of chanting have proven extremely effective as is evident by the preservation of the Vedas, particularly the Ṛg Veda, and works on science and mathematics over generations!!!

Note: This article was prepared to assist the compiler with his development in understanding the proper chanting of Mantras. The reason for this pursuit was his exposure to various individuals and groups and the diversity of how Mantras were chanted. On being exposed to the *Taittiriya Upanishad* in the mid-1980s he started collecting information on the proper chanting of Ved Mantras. Errors in this article are his own, due to his lack of proper knowledge on the subject. The purpose of sharing it is to spark similar interest in others and assist other English-speaking individuals with limited knowledge in Sanskrit as himself, develop their ability to memorize and chant Mantras, to assist in their Spiritual Journey. The compiler acknowledges that he is not a scholar and welcomes criticisms, which will help him in his own journey.

ॐ, सह नौ यशः । सह नौ ब्रह्मवर्चसम्
saha nau yaśaḥ | saha nau brahmavarcasam

May we achieve God's glory together! May the light of Brahman, God, shine alike through all of us!