

# Sanskrit and the Chakras

*A Precise Correlation Of 50 Letters & 50 'Petals' On Six Primary Chakras*

By Bill Francis Barry

The benefits of chanting Sanskrit mantras and spiritual hymns are frequently explained in terms of principles common to the broad spectrum of yoga theory and practice. Scriptures of many traditions, with references to sound vibrations serving as a link between the individual and universal forces, contain concepts that parallel modern physics. Some traditions even claim that the Sanskrit language holds a unique place among languages, as the deva lingua or 'language of the gods', and pre-existed humans as a part of some primordial vibratory building-block of the universe.<sup>1,2</sup> A representative example of this belief, is illustrated in the following quote, from Guy L. Beck's book *Sonic Theology, Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, "*On a macrocosmic level the Sarada-tilaka-Tantra (7.9-14) describes the world as a cosmic tree (body) consisting of a complex network, or 'intricate mesh', of Sanskrit letters, which are said to be the 'root vibrations' of the material creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe.*"<sup>3</sup>

Within this context, this article examines one profound teaching about Sanskrit that is not widely known, despite being taught by respected teachers including: Paramahansa Yogananda, Sanskrit scholar Vyass Houston; Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon); Thomas Ashley-Farrand, David Frawley and others.

With reference to the primary six chakras found along the spine as taught by Yogic scriptures; there is a direct correlation between the 50 phonemes (sounds) of Sanskrit and the 50 'petals' (concentrations of energy) localized on these first six chakras. As explained by Thomas Ashley-Farrand:

*"Each of the fifty letters in the Sanskrit alphabet corresponds to one of the fifty petals on chakras one through six, from the base of the spine to the brow. The sacred Vedic text known as the Upanishads describe the ability of advanced spiritual adepts to actually 'see' the letters on the petals of the chakras. When a Sanskrit mantra is uttered, the petals corresponding to the letters in the words of the mantra vibrate in spiritual resonance"*<sup>4</sup>

The 'petal' attribute of these chakras is described by adepts as a discrete ray, vibration or localization of energy that is part of the chakra.<sup>5,6</sup>

This teaching has profound ramifications for understanding the human spiritual physiology and the mechanics of what happens when we chant Sanskrit mantras and hymns.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

The respected American Sanskrit Institute teaches Sanskrit based upon 50 phonemes represented by a 50 letter alphabet<sup>10</sup>. Although, some Sanskrit scholars include diphthongs and conclude that there are as many as 54 Sanskrit letters, it is my understanding that the earliest Sanskrit dialects are properly represented by 50 Sanskrit letters.<sup>11,12</sup>

This 50 letters /50 petals teaching is explained in the writings of the widely respected teacher, Paramahansa Yogananda, in his book, *God Talks With Arjuna, The Bhagavad Gita*.

*“In a highly simplified description, it may be said that the fifty letters or sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet are on the petals of the sahasrara, and that each alphabetical vibration in turn is connected with a specific petal on the lotuses in the spinal centers (which have a total of fifty corresponding petals...) “Petals” mean ray or vibrations. These vibrations, ... are responsible for various psychological and physiological activities in the physical and astral bodies of man.”<sup>13</sup>*

In the same book, immediately following the above quote, Yogananda states that his paramguru Lahiri Mahasaya(1828-1895) had direct perceptions of this 50 letters /50 petals correspondence and actually diagramed “this concept as he perceived it”.

About 300 years prior to Lahiri Mahasaya’s teaching on this topic, the *Satcakra-Nirupana*, was written in 1577, and includes this 50 letters/50 petals topic. As presented by Tulane University scholar Guy L. Beck.

*“The fifty letters making up the garland are said to be distributed over the six Cakra energy centers located along the spinal column. The Satcakra-Nirupana (v. 4-32), a definitive text on Kundalini-Yoga written by Purnananda Swami in A.D. 1577, describes each Cakra in terms of a specific number of lotus petals with their corresponding Sanskrit letters.”<sup>14</sup>*

In 1919 this 16<sup>th</sup> century *Satcakra-Nirupana* text was republished as part of Sir John Woodroffe’s *The Serpent Power, The Secrets of Tantric and Shaktic Yoga*, under Woodroffe’s pen name Arthur Avalon. The 50 letters /50 petals topic is subsequently included by Woodroffe in some of his other books, e.g. *Mahanirvana Tantra* and *The Garland of Letters*.

An earlier historical reference to the 50 letters /50 petals relationship is found in the *Vasistha Samhita*, a scripture said to be written by the author of the 7<sup>th</sup> mandala (chapter) of the Rig Veda<sup>15</sup>. According to David Frawley,<sup>16</sup> “Kundalini is defined according to the Sanskrit alphabet: ‘starting with the letter – A and ending with the letter – Ksa, so is called the Kundalini.’” The italicized text is the verse from the *Vasistha Samhita II.16*, as quoted by Frawley.

Despite these historical mentions of the 50 letters /50 petals principle, involving a 16<sup>th</sup> century document plus the much older writing by the respected Sage Vashista, as well as the more recent popular writings of Sir John Woodroffe, and the esteemed Paramahansa Yogananda, it remains surprising that this relationship between Sanskrit and the chakras is not more widely known.

There seem to be very few contemporary teachers covering this relationship between the Sanskrit alphabet and the 50 petals of the first six chakras. Other than the already cited works of Thomas Ashley-Farrand and David Frawley, the only other such teachers I am aware of are Sanskrit scholar Vyaas Houston and author Layne Redmond, a Yoga Teacher & Sound Healer.

Vyaas Houston, founder of the American Sanskrit Institute, has created a *Bija Mantras Chakra Tuning* audio CD which leads the listener through two instructional guided meditations teaching the mapping of each of the 50 Sanskrit phonemes to each ‘petal’ of the primary chakras Muladhara through Ajna. Layne Redmond includes an explanation of this letter to petal mapping in the 24 page booklet which accompanies her CD *Chanting the Chakras: Roots of Awakening*. Advanced yoga practitioners and those who have a sensitivity to the chakras and the

associated energy flows, may easily experience aspects of this Sanskrit to 50 petals relationship, by just listening to either of these CDs. Learning to chant the Sanskrit alphabet with these CDs can provide additional direct experience of this topic.

### Concluding comments

I've often thought that the teaching that Sanskrit is hard-wired into our spiritual physiology is among the most profound teachings in explaining how Sanskrit mantras work. However, given the fact that this teaching is not widely known, I've found it sometimes met with surprise or skepticism by students of mantra or yoga. It is my hope that this article may be helpful to teachers and students in that situation.

It is also hoped that this article may encourage increased awareness and further study of this teaching. It is recommended that such study should also include training in, and daily practice of, Sanskrit mantras and hymns, in order to gain direct experience with the relationship between Sanskrit sounds and our bio-spiritual physiology and the subsequent benefits such practice can bring to all aspects of our physical, mental and spiritual lives.

### End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *"Sanskrit is not just an ordinary human language; it is known as deva-bhasha, or the language of the gods. The petals of each chakra have specific syllables or sounds associated with them. A yogi 'sees' the mystical sounds on the petals of the chakras. This is not a mere visual experience; it is an experience of the nada, or the sound of the cosmos"* Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Cosmic Shakti Kundalini (1976), page 56

<sup>2</sup> *"The historical derivation of the science and study of mantras corresponds with the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit has been called a variety of names: Deva Lingua (language of the gods), the 'mother of tongues' ... or simply a divine language. Why should this be? Linguists commonly ascribe these descriptions to Sanskrit, because it provides a root tongue for so many languages, but the real reason is more esoteric. The Sanskrit alphabet has 50 letters in it. This is exactly the same number of petals or spokes that there are on the flowers or wheels of the total of the first six chakras or esoteric energy centers, located along the spine. This is no accident. The Sanskrit language is a tool for working with the subtle energy potential ... in the etheric body. However, the six major chakras contain the 'map of sounds' written on each of the combined 50 petals on those six chakras."* According to Thomas Ashley-Farrand, The Ancient Power of Sanskrit Mantra and Ceremony, Volume I (2002) pages 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Guy L. Beck, Sonic Theology, Hinduism and Sacred Sound (1993), page 130-131

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Ashley-Farrand, Teacher of Mantra Instruction Manual, 2007, page 93 [www.sanskritmantra.com](http://www.sanskritmantra.com)

<sup>5</sup> *"Petals" mean ray or vibrations"* quotation of Paramahansa Yogananda in his book, God Talks With Arjuna, The Bhagavad Gita, published 1995 by Self Realization Fellowship, Volume I, Page 131,

<sup>6</sup> *"The petals of the chakras represent an unfoldment of primal sound through the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. The six lower chakras contain a total of fifty petals, each of which relates to one of the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. This is the "garland of letters" that shows the vibratory frequencies of the chakras. David Frawley in Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound (2010), Page 125*

<sup>7</sup> *"...the Tantric texts about kundalini mention almost always that the fifty phonemes, or certain groups of letters, are placed upon the chalices or on the petals of the 'lotuses' (padma) forming the centers of the subtle body through which flows the kundalini. Whatever the actual distribution of the letters, the system is an expression of the idea that there is an essential link between these phonic energies... and the cosmic and human stages of the rising of the Kundalini."* as written by André Padoux in Vāc, The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras, translated by Jacques Gontier, 1992, page 147

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<sup>8</sup> “In the Yoga scriptures and in various Tantras the cakras are represented with phonemes written on the petals of the lotuses which form these ‘wheels’. The muladhara, in such a case, has four petals...the next wheel has six, and so forth up to the ajnacakra, with two petals only. Thus all the fifty phonemes are in the lotuses.... The principle remains that there is a link between the phonemes and the centers acknowledged by yogic physiology, and this will account for a particular bijamantra supposedly affecting particular centers, thus being instrumental in bringing about the ascent of the Kundalini” as written by André Padoux in Vāc, The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras, translated by Jacques Gontier, 1992, page 135

<sup>9</sup> “The Kundalini Shakti itself is the inner power of mantra, whereas the chakras are the energy fields created by its unfoldment. Mantra is the best means of arousing the kundalini and energizing the chakras, which like the Kundalini remain dormant and asleep in the ordinary human state.” David Frawley in Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound (2010), Page 125

<sup>10</sup> Vyaas Houston, Bija Mantra Chakra Tuning CD, published in 2009 by The American Sanskrit Institute

<sup>11</sup> “the division into fifty phonemes is the usual one...” and the observation, that a count of 51 phonemes had “fallen into disuse” is according to André Padoux in Vāc, The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras, translated by Jacques Gontier, 1992, page 155-156

<sup>12</sup> “There are fifty letters in the Sanskrit alphabet. Although some scholars have included diphthongs (combinations of two or more letters in the logical pronunciation scheme) in the alphabet and arrived at fifty to fifty-four letters, most of the ancient texts use fifty as the number of letters. Thomas Ashley-Farrand, Chakra Mantras (2006), page 14. [www.sanskritmantra.com](http://www.sanskritmantra.com)

<sup>13</sup> The full quote from Paramahansa Yogananda is the following: “In a highly simplified description, it may be said that the fifty letters or sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet are on the petals of the sahasrara, and that each alphabetical vibration in turn is connected with a specific petal on the lotuses in the spinal centers (which have a total of fifty corresponding petals: coccygeal, 4; sacral, 6; lumbar, 10, dorsal, 12; cervical, 16 and medullary-Christ center, 2). “Petals” mean ray or vibrations. These vibrations, singularly and in combinations, and in conjunction with the five elements (tattvas) and other principles of nature, are responsible for various psychological and physiological activities in the physical and astral bodies of man.” According to Paramahansa Yogananda, God Talks With Arjuna, The Bhagavad Gita, published 1995 by Self Realization Fellowship, Volume I, Page 131

<sup>14</sup> Guy L. Beck, Sonic Theology, Hinduism and Sacred Sound (1993), page 129-130

<sup>15</sup> “Vashista, one of 9 Prajapatis, is credited as the chief author of Mandala 7 of the Rigveda. ... Another treatise attributed by him is ‘Vashista Samhita’ - a book on Vedic system of electional astrology” according to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasistha>

<sup>16</sup> David Frawley in Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound (2010), Page 125