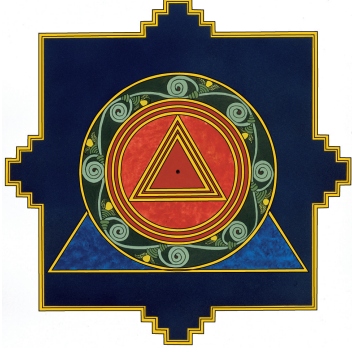


# American Sanskrit Institute



Kali Yantra by PennyLea Morris

## Unlimited Memory

Imagine! Thousands of years ago, Sanskrit thrived in an age where there was no written word. No books, no magazines, newspapers, no mail let alone junk mail, no signs, no ads, no computers. Vast amounts of information were committed to memory; great works of literature, the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, or even entire epics. To a large extent it was the design of the Sanskrit language that made this possible.

For example, the final letter of one word must be blended euphonically with the first letter of the next word, often requiring one or both of them to change. This allows for an unbroken flow of sound so fluid that it enters seamlessly into memory. Sanskrit, as much like music as language, brings the mind into a beautiful flow. This is what attracted me from the very beginning. Even without knowing what I was chanting, the sound of chanted Sanskrit relaxed me and energized me. Inspired by the experience of my new “flow”, I began to study the language formally, learning its pronunciation and grammar. In order to remain in this marvelous flow for longer periods of time, I also began to memorize various stotra, collections of verses to Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, Brahman etc., and eventually entire chapters of philosophical texts, such as the Bhagavad Gītā. I had never before found memorization particularly enjoyable, but because I loved the sound, and it was strung together so fluidly, I found it easy to learn by heart, or as the Sanskrit idiom goes, have it “remain in the throat – kaṅṭha-sthita”.

Knowing a verse or stotra or chapter by heart makes it possible to enjoy the magic of feeling the body, breath, voice, tongue and lips effortlessly reproduce something of exquisite beauty, while the meaning guides the mind to a more restful place.

The first longer piece of text that I was able to recite from memory was most likely the second chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā, a tiny section of the world’s most voluminous epic, the Mahābhārata. It contains 72 śloka, verses consisting of four lines or quarters known as pāda, with eight syllables per pāda. Sanskrit verse may be composed in an wide range of meters, but the vast majority of classical Sanskrit literature is in śloka (śloka may mean simply a verse but more often refers specifically to those with 8 syllables per pāda). Much like the 12 fluid (previously 8) oz. containers for contemporary beverages, the śloka delivered information in the most manageable and easily consumable quantity possible. The more ancient of India’s two great epics, the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki, consists of 24,000 śloka. Originally it was only recited from memory, and even today there are those who know the entire work by heart. By comparison, my memorizing of 72 verses hardly seems worth mentioning, except that it contrasts the enormous gap between our time and an age thousands of years back when great epic literature was sung and heard, rather

than written and read.

To me, 72 verses was a significant increase in flow time. Encouraged, I plunged into the third chapter, but lost steam about halfway through. I put the Gītā to rest, and with time it faded from my memory.

Several years passed and again I felt inspired to take up the Gītā. This time, supported by a better knowledge of Sanskrit, I covered the 1st chapter, easily recovered the 2nd and 3rd and moved on through the 4th and into the beginning of the 5th. I may have thought at some point that I would work my way through the 18 chapters (700 ślokas) of the Gītā, but the thought was not enough to sustain me. My momentum ground to a halt in chapter five.

Many years passed. I was able to observe the same pattern of learning and forgetting with many works of Sanskrit literature. Of course it's always easy to retrieve something you have learned previously, but at one point, I decided that I wanted to actively retain any text that I took the time to learn.

I set upon learning the Gītā in its entirety. Once I made the commitment, it was a matter of having a strategy and getting started. One of the most important factors was changing my concept of memory. In taking on longer selections of text I've had to come to terms with the limitations of what I call *my* memory. My memory is limited, being based upon my past. On the other hand, to work with the idea of "unlimited memory" is a life-transforming act that begins to free you from uncountable self-imposed limitations from the past. This is a direct application of yoga to the learning process. The primary tools are abhyāsa and vairāgya, i.e. the continuous focus on the task at hand without identifying with the remembering as my success or the forgetting as my failure. This means catching and eliminating the usual assessments that always come up when you're learning— everything from "I'm getting this! This is exciting. Imagine what the future of this could be! to – this is difficult - I've wasted so much time. I'll never get to the level

of others. I'm not good enough . . ." To the degree these interruptions are eliminated memory is streamed by the actual content being learned. Memory becomes less fragmented, sharper like a camera brought into in focus. Such a process requires putting aside constraints of time ("If I learn 5 sūtras a day then it would take 800 days . . .) Don't even bother. The project will take the time it takes, and with a memory being liberated from its past, it could actually end up being less. *Still, the single most important factor in producing results is to do something everyday.*

The most learned man I have ever met is a Sanskrit scholar named R. K. Sharma. His memory appears to have vast reserves. When he calls up a verse to demonstrate a point, his humility touches you deeply. Learning in his tradition is a yajña, an act of offering rather than possessing.

Tapping into an unlimited memory is a constant and wondrous process of discovery that is without doubt unique to every individual. Here are some points that have helped me.:

1. I learn a single verse or sūtra until I can repeat it effortlessly. Then a second. String 1 and 2 together until it flows. Add a third. Chant 1, 2 and 3. After adding 4, I remove 1 from the string. I'm chanting 2, 3 and 4. Add # 5 and chant 3, 4 and 5 until it's effortless. *During a sabbatical a number of years ago. I went to a state park every autumn afternoon, sat beside a stream for a couple hours, and did the above process while focusing on the flowing water. Learning was virtually effortless. In a period of two months I learned 700 to 800 sūtras. In many years' previous attempts I had never been able to reach 100.*

2. Continue to recite previously learned chapters, (or verses etc.) at wider intervals as new chapters are learned. For example Chapter One is recited every other day while Chapter Two is being learned, every third day while Chapter 3 is learned – all the way to every 18th day while Chapter 18 is learned.

3. Understand what I'm chanting while I'm chanting word by single word. There seems to be a natural limit to how much an adult can

memorize without understanding its meaning. I say “adult”, because in India it was customary to teach children volumes of Sanskrit while they were quite young, before there was any understanding of meaning. This is where some study of Sanskrit is helpful.

Sound or word (vāk) and meaning (artha) are equally important in gaining the full enrichment that Sanskrit offers. Don't believe the claims that you can get the full benefits of a text just by chanting it without understanding. While it can be a lovely and inspiring experience, and a natural beginning step towards a fuller grasp of a text, it will rarely generate the same depth of focus and feeling as the combination of sound and meaning.

Sanskrit combines perfection of sound with inspired truth to create a living experience of spiritual awakening, a sense of being eternal. It's a flow that we rarely have a chance to know in our fragmented world, but once sampled, it becomes a most important way of remembering what is most essential to our lives. Knowing a verse or stotra or chapter by heart makes it possible to enjoy the magic of feeling the body, breath, voice, tongue and lips effortlessly reproduce something of exquisite beauty, while the meaning guides the mind to a more restful place. It is a gentle way of easing into samādhi, a continuous flow of awareness blended with the flow of Sanskrit, and when it's completed, a peaceful silence.

*Vyaas Houston*