Sanskrit Alphabet Pronunciation

(conanmishler@gmail.com)

Vowels

a/अ   SHORT vowel; pronounced as first 'a' in "america," or as 'u' in "but"

i/इ   SHORT vowel; pronounced as 'i' in "bit," or as 'i' in "pin." Sometimes also
pronounced as 'e' in "england." The latter is technically correct, but 'i' as
in "pin" is understood and in fact much more common for many words.

Examples of 'i' in "pin" pronunciation: "viṣṇu"

Examples of 'e' in "england" pronunciation: "yoni-nilayāyai",
"mandasmita"

u/उ   SHORT vowel; pronounced as 'u' in "push"

ṛ/ऋ   SHORT vowel; Retroflex; pronounced as 'ri' in "rim" or "rip", but with a flip
of the tongue on the palate; not like the English 'r'; Sometimes also
pronounced more like 'ru' in parts of South India.

IMPORTANT:
- **These four vowels (a, i, u, ṛ) are the <u>only</u> SHORT vowels in Sanskrit.
  They are held for only 1 count and should be made as short as
  possible. <u>There is no pause after a short vowel, even when it occurs
  at the end of a word within a sentence.</u>**

  e.g. "brahma karma samādhinā" should be pronounced as
  "brahmakarmasamādhinā"

  Note: There <u>is</u> a pause at the end of a sentence/line, even if it ends with a
  short vowel.

- **All vowels other than these four are LONG and should <u>always</u> be held
  for 2 counts, <u>twice</u> as long as the short vowels.**

ā/आ   LONG vowel; pronounced as 'a' in "barn", "far"

ī/ई LONG vowel; pronounced as 'i' in "liter", 'ee' in "meet"

ū/ऊ LONG vowel; pronounced as 'oo' in "hoot", 'u' in "dude"

e/ए LONG vowel; pronounced as 'e' in "America", "grey"

ai/ऐ LONG (diphthong) vowel; pronounced as 'ai' in "aisle"; Often pronounced as 'ey' in "hey" in south india when it occurs at the end of a mantra. 'ai' as in "aisle" is technically correct, but 'ey' as in "hey" is understood.

Examples of "aisle" pronunciation of 'ai': "shailasute", First 'ai' of baindavāsanāyai

Examples of 'hey' pronunciation: Any mantra which ends in 'yai' – as pronounced by most South Indians. e.g. The 'ai' in "Om śrī mahā rājñyai namaḥ" sounds almost identical to the 'e' in "Om śrī mātre namaḥ"

o/ओ LONG vowel; pronounced as 'o' in "over"

au/औ LONG (diphthong) vowel; pronounced as 'ou' in French Canadian pronunciation of "house." **NOTE: This diphthong is formed simply by joining short 'a' in "america" with long 'u' in "dude." There should be no trace of the English 'a' as in "cat" heard in this diphthong, or any other Sanskrit sound, for that matter. It is <u>not</u> pronounced as the 'ow' in "cow."**

Hint: Pretend it is written as 'ou', a diphthong of 'o' + 'u'.

Example: "brahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam"

Consonants

k, kh, g, gh, ṅ   Gutturals: arising from the throat

k/क pronounced as 'k' in "kite"
kh/ख pronounced as 'ckh' in "Eckhart" Eg. "śrīmukhīṁ"
g/ग pronounced as 'g' in "give"
gh/घ pronounced as 'g-h' in "dig-hard" Eg. "ghanāghanāyai"
ṅ/ङ pronounced as 'n' in "sing" Eg. "śyāmāṅgīṁ"

c, ch, j, jh, ñ	Palatals: arising from the back of the palate; Teeth should come fully closed together to make these sounds.

c/च   pronounced as 'c' in "cello" Eg. "brahmacāri"

ch/छ   pronounced as 'ch-h' in "staunch-heart" Eg. "Om chandaḥ sārāyai namaḥ"

j/ज   pronounced as 'j' in "joy"

jh/झ   pronounced as 'dgeh' in "hedgehog" Eg. "jhaṇa jhaṇa jhiñjhimi jhiṁkṛta"

ñ/ञ   pronounced as 'ny' in "canyon"; Similar to Spanish 'ñ' but with teeth

closed to start

ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ	Retroflexes (a.k.a. Cerebrals): with tip of tongue touching the roof of the mouth behind the teeth – not touching the teeth

ṭ/ट   pronounced as 't' in "tub" but with the tongue in Retroflex position; Eg.
        "kaṭitaṭa"

ṭh/ठ   pronounced as 'th' in "lighthouse" but with the tongue in Retroflex
        position Eg. "naiṣṭhikīṁ"

ḍ/ड   pronounced as 'd' in "dove" but with the tongue in Retroflex position Eg.
        "caṇḍikā"

ḍh/ढ   pronounced as 'd-h' in "red-hot" but with the tongue in Retroflex position
        Eg. "pīṭhārūḍha"

ṇ/ण   pronounced as 'n' in "naught" but with the tongue in Retroflex position
        Eg. "vāṇī"

t, th, d, dh, n	Dentals: with tongue touching the back of the teeth

t/त   pronounced as 't' in "tomato" with the tongue in Dental position

th/थ   pronounced as 'th' in "lighthouse" with the tongue in Dental position Eg.
        "rathotsava-calat"

d/द   pronounced as 'd' in "dig" with the tongue in Dental position

dh/ध   pronounced as 'd-h' in "red-hot" with the tongue in Dental position Eg.
        "dhyāyāmodhavalāvaguṇṭhanavatīṁ"

n/न   pronounced as 'n' in "no" with the tongue in Dental position

p, ph, b, bh, m   Labials: arising from the lips

p/प   pronounced as 'p' in "pine"; Note: Westerners tend to aspirate this some.

ph/फ pronounced as 'p-h' in "up-hill" Eg. "sphurat"

b/ब   pronounced as 'b' in "bird"

bh/भ pronounced as 'bh' in "rub-hard" Eg. "premabhakti", "bhakti"

m/म   pronounced as 'm' in "mother"

Sibilants/Fricatives

ś/श   Palatal: pronounced as 'sh' in "ship" with teeth fully closed together; Eg. "śiva"

ṣ/ष   Retroflex: pronounced as 't' in "nation" with teeth slightly open; Eg. "viṣṇu"

s/स   Dental: pronounced as 's' in "sun"; Eg. "sumadhuraṁ"

h/ह   Guttural: pronounced as 'h' in "hot"

Semivowels

y/य   Palatal: pronounced as 'y' in "yes"

r/र   Retroflex: pronounced as 'r' in Italian "Roma" or Spanish "para", or as in the Scottish pronunciation of 'r'. 'r' sound is made by flipping the tongue against the roof of the mouth with jaw left loose and slightly open – not like the English 'r' which has the jaw tight and nearly closed. Eg. "suravara varṣiṇi durdhara dharṣiṇi"

l/ल   Dental: pronounced as 'l' in "like"

v/व   Labio-Dental: pronounced as a cross between 'v' in "vase" and 'w' in "when"; like the 'w' in German "Willkommen". Eg. "vāṇī", "viṣṇu"

Special Letters

ṁ/अं   Called, "anusvāra" – this letter closes or "nasalizes" the preceding vowel as 'on' in French "bon"

Technically, it should be pronounced as one of the nasal sounds, ṅ, ñ, ṇ, n or m – depending on whether the following consonant is Guttural, Palatal, Retroflex, Dental or Labial, respectively. Note: The following consonant doesn't have to be in the same word to affect 'ṁ' pronunciation.

Examples: "Om mahā padmāṭavī saṁsthāyai namaḥ", "Om saṁśaya ghnyai namaḥ", "bhagavatīṁ mandasmita"

If ṁ is found as the last letter in a sentence, or if the letter following it is a vowel, then it is pronounced as 'm'.

NOTE: It is acceptable to always pronounce ṁ as 'm' – regardless of what consonant might follow it.

ḥ/अः:   Called, "visarga" – this letter makes an 'h' sound followed by a short, soft echo of the preceding vowel.

Examples: "namaḥ", "śāntiḥ"

NOTE: When 'ḥ' occurs in mid-sentence, it is often so subtle that it is unheard. One should, however, at least add a little extra breath and time-gap wherever there is 'ḥ' in mid-sentence. Visarga at the end of a sentence produces a very audible 'h' followed by a short, soft echo of the preceding vowel.

Examples: "śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ"

Conjoined Consonants (E.g. 'jj', 'pt', 'kṣ', 'jñ')

If the vowel preceding the conjunction is short, then the first consonant of the conjunction is lengthened or extended in time. Note that the first consonant also seems to be slightly extended even when the preceding vowel is long if the conjoined consonants form a double consonant (e.g. 'jj', 'tt', 'nn').

Note also that the "extending" of a consonant will sound differently depending on which kind of consonant is being extended. If the consonant being extended is a semi-vowel (y, r, l, v), sibilant (ś, ṣ, s, h) or nasal (ṅ, ñ, ṇ, n, m), then it is voiced and continues to be heard as it is extended in time. Otherwise it is only heard as the "stop" of the previous vowel sound, followed by a perceptible silent pause.

cc   pronounced as 'tc' in "hot chip"; Sanskrit Examples: "saccidānanda"

jj   pronounced as 'dj' in "red jet"; Sanskrit Examples: "lajjā"

tt   pronounced as 'tt' in "hot tomato"
        Examples: "Om dṛpta datta viraktāyai namaḥ"

ll   pronounced as 'll l' in "sell less"
        Examples: "mahita mahāhava mallamatallika vallita rallika bhallirate"

karma – 'r' is lengthened because it is the first semi-vowel of 'rm' conjunction

tyaktānna pāna – first 'n' of 'nn' conjunction is lengthened, though it follows a
        long vowel, because it is part of a double consonant.

ddh   pronounced as 'd-<pause>-h' in "red-<pause>-hot"
        Examples: "Om prasiddhāyai namaḥ"

jñ/ज्ञ   pronounced as 'gn' in "igneous" but with teeth fully closed together.

        Note: 'jñ' usually sounds more like 'gjñ' so that the previous vowel is
        closed with a 'g', then the 'j' silently causes the teeth to come fully closed
        together, then the 'ñ' launches the next vowel with its 'ny' sound as in
        'canyon'.
        Examples: "yajña" (यज्ञ)

kṣ/क्ष   pronounced as 'ct' in "action"; Example: "akṣara"

vy   pronounced as 'v Y' in "Gustav Yeltsin"
        Examples: "gantavyam", "Om avyaktāyai namaḥ"

Acceptable Variations

hm   The 'hm' combination, as in "brahma", should technically make the aspiration sound 'h' <u>before</u> the nasal sound 'm'. Some paṇḍits <u>do</u> pronounce it this way and it is absolutely correct to do so. However, it has become far more common and accepted to make the aspiration 'h' <u>after</u> the nasal 'm' as if it were written 'bramha'. This latter pronunciation is also correct, and in fact preferred because it is easier.

Example:

brahmārpaṇam brahma havir
brahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam
brahmaiva tena gantavyam
brahma karma samādhinā

 (Before Meals Prayer or "yajña" mantra)

hn   The same acceptable variations which exist for the 'hm' combination also exist for the 'hn' combination. That is, 'hn' is more commonly pronounced as 'nh'.

Example:

Om vahni maṇḍala–vāsinyai namaḥ

Common Mistakes (most common first)

1. Many people hold short vowels too long and/or make long vowels too short.

   Example: "vātsalyāmṛta varṣiṇīm" – Many people hold the 'a' in "varṣiṇīm" too long; it should be made as short as possible. The same is true for 'a' in "sarveśvaryai" or "karma", and for 'ṛ' in "amṛteśvaryai".

   Example: "brahma karma samādhinā" – Many people insert a pause between 'brahma' and 'karma', and between 'karma' and 'samādhinā'. <u>There is no pause inserted just because they are written as separate words.</u>

Example: "Om tyakta–yoga–suṣuptaye namaḥ" – Remember that 'o' and 'e' are long vowels and should be held twice as long as short vowels.

2. Many people don't distinguish clearly between Dental and Retroflex consonants. (Examples given above.)
3. Native English speakers tend to pronounce 'r' as the English 'r' in "car". (See 'r' above). Also, sometimes the English 'a' as in "cat" slips in to Sanskrit mantras – especially in the diphthong 'au' which makes 'au' sound like the 'ow' in "cow". Ouch! It should sound more like 'o' + 'u'.
4. Many people don't extend the first of conjoined consonants appropriately. (Examples given above)
5. Some people, especially people from certain areas of India, do not distinguish clearly between ś, ṣ and s. (example "śiva" sounds like "siva")

A Word On 'Om'

'Om' is actually not the correct transliteration of the holy praṇava mantra, 'ॐ'.

It should be written as 'aum', and in fact it is often written like that by scholarly paṇḍits. There is some disagreement among scholars, however, on the proper pronunciation of 'ॐ'. Some say it should be pronounced as 'aum', the

conjunction of the three distinct sounds, 'a' + 'u' + 'm'. Others say it should be pronounced as the 'om' in the English word, "home." After some research, I am of the belief that 'om' is simply the condensed version of 'aum' and 'aum' is simply the elaborated/expanded version of 'om'. Thus they are not fundamentally different in their vibrational essence. I believe the intention you hold while thinking or saying the mantra, and the attention you give to it are more important than which pronunciation you choose.