Unlocking the Splendors of Sanskrit
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A modest but fast-growing number of enthusiasts in India and elsewhere believe that Sanskrit could well become humanity's universal language one day. If the idea seems far-fetched, explains Sanskrit teacher extraordinaire Vyaas Houston, it is only because the many splendors of that ancient language are still relatively unknown. People think it is terribly difficult to learn or that it belongs to just a few who are born into it. These are unfortunate mistakes, Houston feels, which are making this great human treasure trove remote and unavailable. Seeking to rectify the situation, he developed a manner of teaching Sanskrit which is modern in appearance, but actually traditional. Such methods have been mostly forgotten today and replaced, even in India to a large measure, by the academic and competitive approach. Houston is proving this new, or rediscovered, method to be a huge success. Since its inception five years ago, Houston has taught 1,500 souls, plus those he's reached via audio tape. It has become quite rare for one of his students to drop out of a course, and their testimonials glow with praise. Virtually all rejoice in having been inwardly transformed by contact with the language. HINDUISM TODAY interviewed Houston at his home in Warwick, New York, USA.

HINDUISM TODAY: Is Sanskrit unique? Or do you allow that other languages may be every bit as sacred and powerful?

Vyaas Houston: Certainly there are other sacred languages and I am not really qualified to compare. What I know is Sanskrit. It captured me 20 years ago and I've been discovering its wonders ever since. I cannot imagine a more perfectly or powerfully structured language, or one that could open into greater depths. On occasion, I have been blessed to feel its cosmic power, to hear it as a chorus pulsating with creation itself. Others have chanted spontaneous outpourings of Sanskrit without ever having studied it. That makes me humble, and conscious of the layers of Sanskrit I have vet to discover. I can only marvel and endeavor to attune myself further with it.

HT: You've compared Sanskrit to mathematics. Would you please eludicate?

Houston: I am amazed to continually discover principles of sound harmonics working precisely and consistently through the entire language, from the basic four sounds through thousands of words and their variations. It is awesome and beyond any concept of language that I know. The way words unfold from their seed forms is remarkable. A root is always a single syllable that contains one of the basic sounds, a i u or ri. When the root creates a word, the sound undergoes guna, or a transformative principle, to keep it resonating to its optimum. Hence, chit, "to be aware," becomes the resonant chetami, "I am aware," and chetanam, "being aware." Budh, "knowledge," becomes bodhami, "I know," or bodhanam, "knowing." These relationships operate with mathematical precision throughout the language and give it its extraordinary power-and make it easy to learn.

HT: Easy? We thought Sanskrit was tough!

Houston: In academia it's known as the "killer course" that only the occasional genius survives. The problem is in the way it's approached. Sanskrit was never meant as a purely intellectual exercise, on the contrary. It is meant to be learned by being chanted and enjoyed as the sound and energy dance that it is, as children have learned it for millennia and without trauma. Adults can do the same and learn just as easily. When you've spent time chanting the mantras and enjoying the sound, you see without effort how sounds always unfold and words become created, and how Sanskrit operates in utter simplicity. The structure and intention of Sanskrit is first of all through the organization of the sounds. All the complexity of thought is brought into the pristine simplicity of pure sounds, which anyone can hear. Feel and enjoy. You don't have to be an Einstein, you just have to be open to the experience. No one ever drops out of our immersion course anymore. Why? Because we don't create a competitive environment, we all progress together and no one falls behind. This is what my teacher's work was all about, and it's the work I'm carrying on.

HT: Why does no one fall behind?

Houston: About five years ago, computers gave me the idea how students could, from the first lesson, see the beautiful, pristine organization of the language and

begin experiencing it spiritually. This was a radical breakaway. I became convinced that anyone could learn to love Sanskrit as I do, and that I could teach it to anyone. I announced this, and was really tested on it, as you can imagine. But the challenges pushed me to evolve, over a couple of years, a yogic teaching process. Gradually, students learned faster, more easily and enjoyed it a lot more. Demand for our classes soared. On the second day of our courses, a new student can read spiritual texts in Sanskrit and begins to experience the healing power of mantra.

HT: What is the "yogic teaching process?"

Houston: Learning Sanskrit is a yoga. If you teach it that way, all its wonders unfold. But the student needs to be focused. In our courses, we make students acutely aware of the distracting power of previous negative impressions, of competition, tears of judgement etc. and how these patterns close men; off from inner experience and enjoyment of the language. We ask them to agree to let go the patterns and keep their focus. Then, if a person is out of focus. I stop-to help him catch up. Otherwise, we no longer have the listening into which Sanskrit can really resonate. A musician knows when the audience listens. That's when the magic happens, when you are moved into deeper awareness. This is purification. This is yoga, and what Sanskrit is designed for. Sanskrit the technical language, she medium, of yoga. It is where the distinctions have been laid out in the most sophisticated terms, and where the human mind has stored its instructions for what to do. Sanskrit demands your concentration, takes you to meditation, then into contemplation where you are aligned with the truth of what the sound is saying, where sound, words, grammar and truth are all fitting together as one.

HT: What do you see in Sanskrit's future, and in your own? Houston: Interest in Sanskrit is growing by leaps and bounds. Because of its great precision, some think that, at some point, humanity may choose it as the planetary language. Language is all-important. It is the medium through which life on the planet is evolving. Unfortunately nowadays language is used, more often than not, to fragment us and distance us from the truth. But Sanskrit vibrates otherwise. It is precise, it is clear. It establishes a link between the one speaking or listening and the rest of life, the immediate effect of which is happiness, joy, inspiration and all the higher functions. Sanskrit enhances communication, and therefore quality of life for everyone concerned. This is what nourishes my own vision for she establishment of a full-time Sanskrit school, open year-round, where people can learn in an ashram atmosphere.

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