[American Mantras](#)
Category : [May 1997](#)
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BUSINESS

American Mantras
 Sanskrit words plunge into the mainstream

The headline in a recent Macweek magazine, "Netscape's Good Karma," is typical of a growing trend of corporate America to adopt Sanskrit terms. The fascination for "cool" words from India such as guru and karma first developed in the 1960s when hip baby-boomers put on Nehru jackets and swayed to the sitar sounds of Ravi Shankar. Today these words of the rishis are common in movies and television and the norm in periodicals ranging from computers and finance to gardening, sports and theatre.

Companies in the US have adopted Hindu names such as Shiva Corp. (communications hardware), Avatar Systems (hard drives) and Digital Guru (computer bookstore). Managers and CEOs in US firms are being dubbed "computer gurus" or "investment pundits," titles which originally indicated a teacher in any subject, such as music, dance and sculpture, but especially in religion. The usage of the word guru is so omnipresent that even garden enthusiasts can fill in a digital application to qualify as a "Virtual Garden Guru" on the World Wide Web. Just type your name in the box which says "Guru Applicant."

Guru or pundit may be an honorific title, but you have to be an industry giant to be pronounced an avatar. Borrowed from the Sanskrit word for the forms in which Vishnu descends to Earth, avatar now "deifies" a powerful leader or a modern folk hero and is used in expressions like "consider the avatars of 70s culture." Avatar also names a new wave of cyber-characters, cartoony beings Internet surfers can use to float around and communicate with other avatars in virtual chat rooms on the Web.

Other terms of the times include mantra, meaning "mystic formula," a word of choice when describing hot new trends or ways of doing business. Phrases such as "liquidity, profitability, and growth, which has become a real mantra for the company," found in Fortune magazine, are becoming commonplace in the pages of economic and financial news, including the Wall Street Journal.

Karma, the law of cause and effect, is being taken seriously, even on Wall Street. One Money Daily writer commented, "There is still enough good karma among investors to halt the market's downward mobility."

In the '70s programmers coined computer terms like "guru meditation," used to name the cryptic message indicating what the problem was when an Amiga computer's system crashed and "cycle of reincarnation," referring to a function in computer hardware.

Now Hindu Deities are becoming favorites for software names,

and people are playing games on the Web using a connection named Kali. In one shoot'em-up game called Descent, the programmer slipped in a message of nonviolence. By entering a secret code a player can stop the enemy ships from firing--the code word: "ahimsa."