Sanskrit
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Sanskrit

A Global Language?

From the colonial colleges of New Delhi, India, to the computer caves of Silicon Valley, California, where programmers hunch over CRT screens, program listings and coffee mugs, a surprisingly large number of people are dusting off and polishing to new brilliance one of the world's oldest, and still flourishing, languages: Sanskrit.

Among languages, Sanskrit is very "hot." Sanskrit grammarian greats Panini and Patanjali (circa 3rd century BCE) would love to be alive today-and maybe are, leading Sanskrit into its new incarnation as a precision computer programming language. Computer "sutras to program by" are the most exotic expression of the new Sanskrit revolution. But some enthusiastists foresee Sanskrit returning as a spoken language - not just in India - but as a global tool of spiritual communication.

Vyaas Houston is one of the new breed of Sanskrit lovers and promoters. He recounts how a few months ago at a New York City communications conference, "I stood up in front of nearly a hundred people and told them that 'my life is dedicated to Sanskrit, particularly bringing Sanskrit back to prominence in the world as a spoken language. Sanskrit is the mother language that lives at the heart of human spirituality and human unity...It is a language whose time has come." When he finished his visionary speech, he marvels, "The response was overwhelming...And the course leader left me in awe when she concluded that, "Perhaps in 100 years we'll be speaking Sanskrit." The forecast of all earthlings speaking Sanskrit in 100 years may seem implausible to most - not to Houston. He sees its spiritual and tonal qualities helping to weave human unity and overcome differences. Toward this, he's developed The Sanskrit Training course. Using what Houston terms the "immersion method," the course aspires to turn Sanskrit dumbos into Sanskrit enthusiasts in one short weekend. He is also working with a

Macintosh computer programmer to create a learning program "that will make it much, much easier for people to learn Sanskrit," he told HINDUISM TODAY.

Now 40, Houston is an American who grew up in steel-own Pittsburgh, embraced hatha yoga and "seemed to gravitate to mind concentration exercises" when he was twenty. After picking up his first college degree, the ended up living a Thoreau-like year of solitude in the woods of Cape Code, New England. When he met Dr. R. Mishra, a yogi/brain surgeon (now Swami Brahmananda) later that year, some past-life Sanskrit samskaras switched on and Houston plunged into Sanskrit 10 hours a day at Dr. Mishra's ashram in the countryside of New York. He became an administrator of the ashram and eventually earned a Masters degree in Sanskrit from Columbia University by the time he was 32. His thesis was on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. One of the first projects he did was to create a course called Master of Yoga that required people to memorize the Yoga Sutras in Sanskrit as a method of boosting serious students into deeper cognition of yoga.

A slight man who likes to wear orange-colored shirts, Houston's one frustration with his 17-year apprenticeship to Sanskrit is that he couldn't take enough people through a certain threshold of learning it. His students would bellyflop and give up when it came to scary grammar like declensions and case endings. Houston couldn't get over this hump until last year on a daydreamy day he pictured Sanskrit grammar arranging itself in patterns on a computer screen. He could hear the tones and see the script in his imagination and as he remembers, "I saw very clearly that Sanskrit could be made easy and enjoyable to learn." The Sanskrit Training course was born out of that interlude. He states he has taught more people in the last few months with his course than in the past 15 years. "I engage them in the direct experience of the sound, actually enjoying the sound...And I take them through the entire 14 declensions at once - pointing out universal and similar patterns. They have basic grammar at the end of the weekend."

He still uses the Yoga Sutras as a focal point to the learning program. "I actually use the Sutras as a means of clearing up people's considerations about learning...Now I'm heading toward conversational Sanskrit so people can enjoy it as a living language."