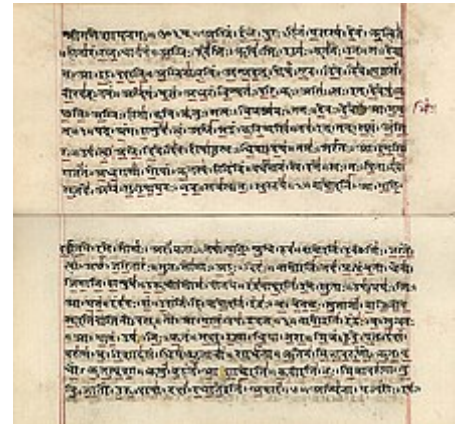


# Svādhyāya

*Svādhyāya* (Devanagari: स्वाध्याय) is a Sanskrit term which means self-study and especially the recitation of the Vedas and other sacred texts.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> It is also a broader concept with several meanings. In various schools of Hinduism, *Svadhyaaya* is a *Niyama* (virtuous observance) connoting introspection and "study of self".<sup>[4]</sup>



Rigveda manuscript, Sanskrit in Devanagari script, India, early 19th century

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## Etymology, meaning and usage

Svādhyāya is a compound Sanskrit word composed of svā (स्वा) + adhyāya (अध्याय). Adhyāya means "a lesson, lecture, chapter; reading".<sup>[5]</sup> Svā means "own, one's own, self, the human soul".<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, Svādhyāya literally means "one's own reading, lesson".

Svādhyāya is also a compound Sanskrit word composed of svā (स्वा) + dhyāya (ध्याय). Dhyāya means "meditating on".<sup>[7]</sup> The root of Adhyāya and Dhyāya is "Dhyai" (ध्‍यै) which means "meditate, contemplate, think of".<sup>[8]</sup> The term Svādhyāya therefore, also connotes "contemplation, meditation, reflection of one self", or simply "to study one's own self".<sup>[9]</sup>

The term *Svadhyaaya* has other meanings. In the *Smritis*, it refers to the historical practice of self-reciting Vedas to ensure it is memorized and faithfully transmitted, without writing, by the word of mouth, to the next generation.<sup>[10]</sup> In various schools of Hinduism, particularly *Yoga*, *Svadhyaaya* is also a *niyama*, a virtuous behavior. As a virtue, it means "study of self", "self-reflection", "introspection, observation of self".<sup>[11][12][13]</sup>

*Svādhyāya* is translated in a number of ways. Some translate it as the "study of the scriptures and *darśanas*".<sup>[14]</sup> Some translators simply use the word "study" without qualifying the type of study.<sup>[15][16]</sup> MacNeill translates it as "self-study or spiritual self-education".<sup>[17]</sup> Dhyāya, when used in the context of self study in ancient and medieval Indian texts, is synonymous with *Abhyasa*, *Adhi* and *Viks*; while Adhyāya, when used in context of reciting and reading in Indian texts, is synonymous with *Anukti*, *Nipatha*<sup>[18]</sup> and *Patha*.<sup>[19][20]</sup>

# Svadhya in ancient literature

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## Upanishads

Taittiriya Upanishad's hymn 1.9.1<sup>[21]</sup> emphasizes the central importance of *Svadhya* in one's pursuit of Reality (Rta), Truth (Satya), Self-restraint (Damah), Perseverance (Tapas), Tranquility and Inner Peace (Samas),<sup>[22]</sup> Relationships with others, family, guests (Praja, Prajana, Manush, Atithi) and all Rituals (Agnaya, Agnihotram).<sup>[23][24]</sup>

Taittiriya Upanishad, however, adds in verse 1.9.1, that along with the virtue of *svādhyāyā* process of learning, one must teach and share (*pravacana*) what one learns.<sup>[23]</sup> This is expressed by the phrase "*svādhyāyapravacane ca*", translated as "and learning and teaching" by Gambhīrānanda<sup>[25]</sup>

In verse 1.11.1, the final chapter in the education of a student, the Taittiriya Upanishad reminds,<sup>[26]</sup>

सत्यंवद । धर्मचर । स्वाध्यायान्माप्रमदः ।

Speak the Satya, follow the Dharma, from *Svadhya* never cease.

— Taittiriya Upanishad, 1.11.1-2 <sup>[27][28][29]</sup>

One of the earliest mention of *Svādhyāyā* is found in Taittiriya Aranyaka 2.15: "*svādhyāyo-adhyetavyah*" ("*svādhyāyā* must be practiced"). Śatpath Brāhmana also repeats it.<sup>[30]</sup> Chandogya Upanishad verse 4.16.1-2 recommends both silent (*mānas*) and vocal (*vāchika*) types of *svādhyāyā*.

## Other scriptures

Patanjali's *Yogasutra*, in verse II.44, recommends *Svadhya* as follows

स्वाध्यायादिष्टदेवतासंप्रयोगः॥

Study thy self, discover the divine.

— Patanjali's *Yogasutra*, II.44 <sup>[31]</sup>

Vishnu Smriti's verse 22.92, states that "human body is cleansed by water, the mind is cleansed by truth, the soul by self-study and meditation, while understanding is cleansed by knowledge".<sup>[32]</sup>

Vasistha Dharmasastra verses 27.1 through 27.7 states that *Svadhya* helps an individual understand and overcome his past.<sup>[33]</sup> Apastamba Dharmasutra 1.4.12.1 states *Svadhya* is a form of Tapas. This view is shared by Baudhayana Dharmasastra in verses 4.1.29 to 4.1.30, which adds that "svadhya is a means of getting past one's past mistakes and any guilt".<sup>[34]</sup> Baudhayana Dharmasastra describes "Svadhya", in verse 2.6.11, as the path to Brahman (Highest Reality, Universal Spirit, Eternal Self).<sup>[33]</sup>

*Svādhyāyā* is mentioned as one of the virtues in Bhagavad Gita 16.1.<sup>[35]</sup> *Svadhya* is mentioned a second time in Bhagavad Gita verse 17.15 as a component of the discipline of one's speech by which, states the verse, "speak words that are truthful, kind, helpful, and elevates those who hear it".<sup>[36][37]</sup>

# Svādhyāya as a historical practice

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## Learning one's Vedic recension

As a tool for memorization, *svādhyāya* had a unique meaning for Vedic scholars as the principal tool for the oral preservation of the Vedas in their original form for millennia. When used as a formal part of scriptural study, *svādhyāya* involves repeated recitations of scripture for purposes of mastering the mantras with their accurate pronunciation.<sup>[10]</sup>

The Vedas had not been committed to writing in ancient times. Almost all printed editions depend on the late manuscripts that are hardly older than 500 years, not on the still-extant and superior oral tradition.<sup>[38]</sup> Monier Monier-Williams defines *śruti* as "sacred knowledge orally transmitted by the *Brāhmins* from generation to generations, the Veda".<sup>[39]</sup> Michael Witzel explains this oral tradition as follows:

The Vedic texts were orally composed and transmitted, without the use of script, in an unbroken line of transmission from teacher to student that was formalized early on. This ensured an impeccable textual transmission superior to the classical texts of other cultures; it is, in fact, something like a *tape-recording*.... Not just the actual words, but even the long-lost musical (tonal) accent (as in old Greek or in Japanese) has been preserved up to the present.<sup>[40]</sup>"

The commentator Sāyana discusses this term in the introduction of his commentary on the *R̥gveda*, in which he says that *svādhyāya* enables Vedic rituals (*yājñika karmakānda*) to take place.<sup>[41]</sup>

Madhva, the dualistic Vaishnava philosopher, defined philosophy as the three-stage process of understanding (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and application (*nididhyāsana*), expressing itself in two forms: study (*svādhyāya*) and teaching (*pravacana*). Of these two, Madhva considered teaching to be the highest aspect of discipline leading to *mokṣa*.<sup>[42]</sup> Mādhavāchārya's views on *svādhyāya* are to be found in chapter 15 of *Sarva-Darśana-Sangraha* (cf. references).

The *Taittirīya Upanishad*, which belongs to the *Yajur Veda*, is still popular among those who learn Vedic chanting.<sup>[43]</sup> Recitation of mantras (*Japa*) is an integral part of Bhakti Yoga, and in this tradition of Hinduism, it is sometimes called *Japa Yoga*.<sup>[44]</sup>

## Exceptions

There are certain days on which *svādhyāya* were prohibited, these were called *anādhyāya*, after which *svādhyāya* must be resumed on the following day ; therefore the day of resumption is also called *svādhyāya*.<sup>[45]</sup>

## Svādhyāya as a Niyama

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*Svādhyāya* is one of the three key elements in the practice of yoga as defined in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, appearing in the opening verse of Book two on spiritual practice and elaborated upon in two other verses.<sup>[46]</sup> Patanjali mentions *svādhyāya* a second time as one of the five recommended observances (*niyamas*), along with purity, contentment, austerity, and self-surrender.<sup>[47]</sup> The five *niyamas*, together with the five abstentions (*yamas*),<sup>[48]</sup> have been described as "'the ten commandments' of the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga*."<sup>[49]</sup>

The practice of Svadhyaya as a Niyama is perfected in many forms.<sup>[9]</sup> One form of Svadhyaya is mantra meditation, where certain sound constructs pregnant with meaning are recited, anchoring the mind to one thought. This practice helps draw the mind away from outward-going tendencies, silencing the crowding of thoughts, and ultimately towards inward feeling of resonance.<sup>[9]</sup> It can alternately be any music, sermon, chant, inspirational book that absorbs the person to a state of absorption, trance, unifying oneness.<sup>[50]</sup>

Svadhyaya is practiced as a self-reflection process, where one silently meditates, in Asana, on one's own behaviors, motivations and plans. Svadhyaya is, in a sense, for one's spirit and mind a process equivalent to watching one's body in a non-distorting mirror.<sup>[51]</sup> This self-study, in Yoga, is not merely contemplation of one's own motives and behaviors, but also of one's circumstances and the environment one is in, assessing where one is in one's life, what is one's life direction, if and how desirable changes may lead to a more fulfilling Self.<sup>[50][52][53]</sup>



Yoga meditation – a means to the virtue of Svadhyaya.

## Notes

1. For compound derivation as स्व + अध्यायः and meanings of *svādhyāya* as "1. self-recitation, muttering to one-self. -2. study of the Vedas, sacred study, perusal of sacred books. -3. the Veda itself. -4. a day on which sacred study is enjoined to be resumed after suspension." see: Apte 1965, p. 1016, right column.
2. For definition of "स्वाध्याय, m. repeating to oneself, study of the Veda; repetition of the Veda aloud" see: Macdonell 1996, p. 373, left column.
3. For definition as "the regular habit of study of religious books", see: Chatterjee and Datta (1984), p. 303.
4. Sharda Nandram (2010), Synchronizing Leadership Style with Integral Transformational Yoga Principles, In Spirituality and Business (Editors: Nandram and Borden), Springer Berlin Heidelberg, ISBN 978-3-642-02660-7, pages 183-203
5. AdhyAya (<http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/tamil/index.html>), Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon, Germany
6. SvA (<http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/tamil/index.html>), Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon, Germany
7. dhyAyam (<http://spokensanskrit.de/index.php?tinput=dhyAyam&direction=SE&link=yes&choic e=yes>), Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon, Germany
8. धै (<http://spokensanskrit.de/index.php?tinput=dhyai&direction=SE&script=HK&link=yes&begin ning=0>) Sanskrit English Dictionary, Koeln University, Germany
9. Rolf Sovik (2014), Understanding Yourself: the path of Svadhyaya, Himalayan Institute Press, ISBN 978-0893892470, pages 191-197
10. For traditional uses of *svādhyāya* in the sense of repetition of scriptural mantras for purposes of memorization, see: Arya 1986, p. 6.
11. C Woiwode (2013), Transcendence and Spirituality Human Needs and the Practices of the Indian Svadhyaya Movement, Journal of Developing Societies, 29(3): 233-257
12. KH Garland (2010), Yoga, Pradhana Dharma, and the Helping Professions: Recognizing the Risk of Codependency and the Necessity of Self-Care, International Journal of Yoga Therapy, 1(1): 90-97
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14. Bhattacharyya 1956, pp. 25–26, volume 4.
15. For translation of YS 2.1 as ""Purificatory action, study, and making God the motive of action, constitute the *yoga* of action." see: Radhakrishnan and Moore, p. 462.
16. For translation of YS 2.1 as "Austerity, study, and the dedication of the fruits of one's work to God: these are the preliminary steps to *yoga*." see: Prabhavananda and Isherwood, p. 95.
17. Paul MacNeill (2011), *Yoga and Ethics: The Importance of Practice*, in *Yoga-Philosophy for Everyone* (Editors: Stillwagon et al.), Wiley-Blackwell, ISBN 978-0470658802, Chapter 18
18. often used to describe recitation of Vedas by a student; see BL Dwivedi (1994), *Evolution of educational thought in India*, ISBN 978-8172110598, page 119
19. Study (<http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/tamil/index.html>) Monier Williams Sanskrit Dictionary, Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon, Germany; see discussion notes and cited Indian texts
20. Sanskrit English Dictionary (<http://spokensanskrit.de>) Koeln University, Germany; Search for each of: abhyAsam, adhl, vlkS, anUkti, nipaTha, paTh
21. Original:  
 ऋतं च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । सत्यं च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । तपश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । दमश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । शमश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । अग्नयश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । अग्निहोत्रं च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । अतिथयश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । मानुषं च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । प्रजा च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । प्रजनश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च । प्रजातिश्च स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च ॥ १ ॥  
 For two translations: TN Raghavendra (2002), *Vishnu Saharanama*, ISBN 8190282727, page 763, and Zaehner 1966, p. 136
22. शम
23. TN Raghavendra (2002), *Vishnu Saharanama*, ISBN 8190282727, page 763
24. For translation, see: Zaehner 1966, p. 136.
25. For Sanskrit text of *Taittirīya Upanishad* 1.9.1; translation of स्वाध्यायप्रवचने च (*svādhyāyappravacane ca*) as "and learning and teaching (are to be practiced)"; and comment that "*Svādhyāyaḥ* is study (of the scriptures). *Pravacanam* is teaching (of the scriptures)", see: Gambhīrānanda 1986, pp. 40–43.
26. For context as "the teacher gives the scholar who is departing on his life's journey", and translation of opening phrases of *Taittirīya Upanishad* 1.11, see: Winternitz 1972, p. 259, vol. 1.
27. TN Raghavendra (2002), *Vishnu Saharanama*, ISBN 8190282727, page 197-198
28. For text and translation of *Taittirīya Upanishad* 1.11.1 phrase *svādhyāyānmā* (= *svādhyāyāt* "from study" + *mā pramadaḥ* "make no deviation") as "Make no mistake about study", see: Gambhīrānanda 1986, pp. 47–48.
29. For translation of *Taittirīya Upanishad* 1.11.1 phrase as "Do not neglect study [of the Veda]", see: Zaehner & 1966 1966, p. 136; For translation of *Taittirīya Upanishad* 1.11.1 phrase *svādhyāyappravacanābhyām na pramaditavyam* as "Do not be negligent in the study and recitation [of the Veda]", see: Gambhīrānanda 1986, pp. 47–48.
30. Monier-Williams
31. Stephen Phillips (2009), *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, ISBN 978-0231144858, page 209
32. Original: Vishnu Smriti (<https://archive.org/stream/vishnusmriti#page/n75/mode/2up>), Verse 22.92, page 68 (in Sanskrit)  
 Translation: Vishnu Smriti (<https://archive.org/stream/institutesvishn00jollgoog#page/n140/mode/2up>) Julius Jolly (Translator), Charles Scribner & Sons, Chapter XXII, Verse 92, page 97
33. W.O. Kaelber, *Tapta-Marga: Asceticism and Initiation in Vedic India*, State University of New York Press, pages 53-60, 112-115
34. Walter O. Kaelber (1979), Tapas and Purification in Early Hinduism (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3269719>), *Numen*, Vol. 26, Fasc. 2 (Dec., 1979), pages 192-214
35. For text of BG 16.1 and translation of *svādhyāya* as "study of the scriptures", see: Chidbhavananda, p. 779.

36. For text of BG 17.15 and translation of *svādhyāyābhyasanaṁ* as "the practice of the study of scriptures" see: [Gambhīrānanda 1997](#), pp. 644–645.
37. Christopher Key Chapple (2009), *The Bhagavad Gita: Twenty-fifth–Anniversary Edition*, State University of New York Press, [ISBN 978-1-4384-2841-3](#), page 648
38. Quotation of "... almost all printed editions depend on the late manuscripts that are hardly older than 500 years, not on the still extant and superior oral tradition" is from: Witzel, M., "Vedas and *Upaniṣads*", in: [Flood 2003](#), p. 69.
39. For definition of *śruti* as "sacred knowledge orally transmitted" see: [Monier-Williams 1899](#), p. 1101.
40. For the quotation comparing recital to a "tape-recording" see: Witzel, M., "Vedas and *Upaniṣads*", in: [Flood 2003](#), pp. 68–69.
41. For text of Sāyana commentary as *karma-kāraṇa-bhūta-svādhyāya* see: [Sontakke 1972](#), p. 19.
42. For Madhva's threefold definition of philosophy and the twofold division of expression, see: Raghavendrāchar, H. N., "Madhva's Brahma-Mīmāṃsā", in: [Bhattacharyya \(1956\)](#), volume 3, p. 330.
43. For *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* as part of *Yajur Veda*, and continued popularity with students of Vedic chant, see: [Gambhīrānanda 1986](#), p. iv.
44. Jennifer Munyer (2012), *How Yoga Won the West, in Yoga-Philosophy for Everyone: Bending Mind and Body* (Editors: Liz Swan and Fritz Allhoff), Wiley-Blackwell, [ISBN 978-0-470-65880-2](#), pages 3-14
45. Sanskrit English Dictionary of [Monier-Williams](#)
46. For Sanskrit text of verses 2.1, 2.32, and 2.44 and discussion as a key practice, see: [Taimni 1961](#), pp. 127–128, 220, 250.
47. For text and translation of YS 2.32, and translation of *niyama* as "observances", see: [Taimni 1961](#), p. 220.
48. For the five *yamas* or "restraints" as: abstention from injury (*ahiṃsā*, **nonviolence**), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), control of the carnal desires and passions (*brahmacarya*), and non-acceptance of unnecessary gifts (*aparigraha*), see: Chatterjee and Datta (1984), p. 302.
49. For quotation including *svādhyāya* in the comparison to the ten commandments, see: Hiriyanā, M., "The *Sāṃkhya*", in: [Bhattacharyya 1956](#), p. 49, volume 3.
50. Gary Kraftsow, [Polishing the mirror](http://www.yogajournal.com/article/philosophy/polishing-the-mirror/) (<http://www.yogajournal.com/article/philosophy/polishing-the-mirror/>), Yoga Journal, February 25, 2008
51. G Kraftsow (2002), *Yoga for Transformation: Ancient Teachings and Holistic Practices for Healing Body, Mind, and Heart*, Penguin, [ISBN 978-0140196290](#), pages 22-27
52. Nina Markil, Hatha Yoga: Benefits and Principles for a More Meaningful Practice, *ACSM'S Health & Fitness Journal*, September/October 2010, 14(5): pp 19-24
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