GETTING READY FOR THE TRIP: The Tibetan Alphabet

ORIGINS OF THE TIBETAN ALPHABET

In the days before a Tibetan written alphabet had been created, Thonmi Sambhota was sent by King Srongtsan Gampo over the dangerous mountain passes from Tibet into India to study Sanskrit. When Sambhota returned, he successfully developed a written alphabet, somewhat similar to the Sanskrit alphabet, which was capable of transcribing spoken Tibetan language sounds. An impressive undertaking!

This written Tibetan alphabet, developed in the second half of the seventh century A.D., was based on the structural system used to organize the alphabet of the sophisticated and elegant Sanskrit language. In that system, sounds were grouped together depending on where they were produced in the mouth and throat. For example, some sounds which are produced far back in the throat might be grouped together as the “gutterals”, while others which are produced near the front of the mouth might be grouped together as the “dentals”. This grouping organizes the sounds and thus will greatly simplify your learning of the Tibetan alphabet. Instead of 30 completely dissimilar consonants, the 30 consonants are grouped into seven groups of four consonants, plus 2 more.

PRONOUNCING THE TIBETAN ALPHABET

- You will find that most of the major sounds in Tibetan are the same or very similar to those in English.

- Every letter in Tibetan ends in the sound “ah”. (In English, letters end in differing sounds, e.g., “D” ends in “ee”, “J” ends in “ay”, etc.) In Tibetan, the method for changing the inherent final “ah” sound to a different vowel sound is made by adding another symbol, a vowel symbol, either above or below the letter to be changed.

- Some sounds will at first be indicated here with a small ལ to indicate a “breathy” or aspirated quality, however, these will then be transliterated in your sadhanas as KHA, CH, etc. This is to help you avoid the two mistakes beginners typically make. These are: 1) PH is a “breathy” (aspirated) PʰA sound, it is not an “f” sound, as in the English word “phone”, and 2) TH is a “breathy” TʰA sound, and is not like the “th” in “thing”.

- Although Tibetan is a tonal language, we’ll ignore that, as the focus is learning to read your sadhana.
LEARNING TO LEARN THE TIBETAN ALPHABET
Several basic principles will help you learn these new symbols faster and remember them longer:

“CHUNKING” THE INFORMATION
There are 30 sound-symbols in this alphabet, already arranged in groups of 4 to a row. You will probably learn fastest by memorizing a “chunk” or group of four at a time. When you are 80% proficient, move on to the next four, always reviewing the previously learned symbols.

ASSOCIATING THE UNKNOWN WITH THE KNOWN
Try to associate the shape of the symbol and its sound with something you already know. In English, a typical pre-primer example is “A is for apple, B is for ball, C is for cup”, etc. As a start, some possible associations have been made for you—but feel free to make up your own. It’s been noticed that students in the artistic and visually oriented professions don’t seem to have the need to do this—but the rest of us need all the help we can get!

UTILIZE ALL OF YOUR SENSORY MODALITIES
See it, Say it. Then Trace it with your finger, Write it, and Say it. And say it out loud so you can hear it! Berlitz is supposed to have said that saying a word 10 to 20 times will be better remembered than simply reading the same word 50 to 100 times.

SPACE OUT YOUR LEARNING TIMES
Try to memorize some items daily, rather than “cramming” once a week. You’ll retain the information longer. It helps to make flash cards to carry with you. You can quickly review these during “down times”, such as waiting in lines, waiting for the laundry to dry, waiting in traffic, all those many times when you’re waiting, waiting, waiting!

PHYSICAL LOCATION OF PRODUCTION OF FIRST 16 TIBETAN CONSONANTS
### READING THE TIBETAN ALPHABET

#### How each letter is read →

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where (or how) the letters are produced</th>
<th>Rows 1-5: Spoken “hard” without aspiration</th>
<th>Rows 1-5: With strong aspiration “breathy”</th>
<th>Rows 1-5: Semi-aspirated or “soft”</th>
<th>Rows 1-4: Nasalized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 1</strong> GUTTERALS (soft palate)</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ka</td>
<td>ka</td>
<td>ga</td>
<td>nga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 2</strong> PALATALS (hard palate)</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cha</td>
<td>cha</td>
<td>ja</td>
<td>nga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 3</strong> DENTALS (near the teeth)</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ta</td>
<td>ta</td>
<td>da</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 4</strong> LABIALS (the lips)</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pa</td>
<td>pa</td>
<td>ba</td>
<td>ma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 5</strong> Fricatives &amp; Semivowel</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tsa</td>
<td>tsa</td>
<td>dza</td>
<td>wa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 6</strong> Sibilants &amp; Semivowels</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(s)zha</td>
<td>za</td>
<td>a (ah)</td>
<td>ya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 7</strong> Semivowels &amp; Sibilants</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ra</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>sha</td>
<td>sa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Row 8</strong> Aspirates</td>
<td>🌀</td>
<td>🌂</td>
<td>🌁</td>
<td>🌃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ha</td>
<td>a (ah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ROWS 1 AND 2 - GUTTERALS AND PALATALS

On the next page, you’ll see the first two rows of Tibetan letters with some visual cues to use if you wish. (Or make up better ones!) Memorize these eight letters and their sounds, using the suggestions from the previous page.

YOUR WRITING STYLE

It helps most students memorize the letters if they also write them. When you write English letters, parts of those English letters may be written above, on, or below a real or imagined line. But Tibetan letters are all written below an imaginary line, they “hang” from that line. (Some of the vowel markers may go above that line).

The directions for writing the letters given on the next page are for using a brush with ink, if you want to learn a calligraphic style. But if you are simply writing these with pencil, you may want to join some of the strokes together. The main thing is to observe the proportions within the individual letters.

MAKING SYLLABLES OUT OF LETTERS

One of the rewarding things about reading Tibetan is that the syllables and words are so short, you can begin sounding out words immediately! Most syllables are only two or three letters long. In any two-letter syllable, the first letter is read with the appropriate vowel sound, and the second letter is read without any vowel sound. Here’s an example of how it works:

Since ཞ = na and ག = nga, ཞང (not nanga, there’s no vowel sound for second letter). ཞང means “inside”, or “internal”. Buddhists are sometimes referred to as “nang-pa” or “internal ones”, i.e., ones who are seeking inside. Now try reading and writing in the answers to these examples:

1. If མྩྦྱ = la and བྩྦླ = ma, then མྩྦྱ  བྩྦླ = __________  མྩྦྱ བྩྦླ is the word for “path”

2. Now, looking at the next page, write this word which means “what” in the blank. མྩྦྱ བྩྦླ = __________

Answers: མྩྦྱ བྩྦླ is read as lam (not lama), and བྩྦླ is read as gang.
ROWS 1 AND 2
GUTTERALS AND PALATALS

See it as you say it then Write it as you say it

Kangaroo  KA
Letter "k"  KHA
Letter "g"  GA
ToNGue  NGA
CHariot  CHA
CHariot  ChA
Jaybird  IA
caNYon  NYA
ROWS 3 AND 4 - DENTALS AND LABIALS

Now continue with the memorization of rows 3 and 4. In doing this, you will be encouraged to know that these first 16 letters comprise most of the real workhorses of the Tibetan alphabet. In fact, if you were to pick up a Tibetan dictionary, you would find that about 75% of the words in it have one of these first 16 letters as their root letter.

As soon as you feel fairly confident with your recognition of these letters, (use flashcards for reinforcement! ) and have looked at the vowel symbols below, go on to the next page, and you’ll see how these letters and vowels you have just learned can be read in the Chenrezik Refuge Prayer. You’ll be surprised what you can do already!

THE VOWEL SYMBOLS

Vowel symbols are placed above or below a letter to change its inherent “ah” vowel sound. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ै</td>
<td>a (pronounced “ah”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ै</td>
<td>i (pronounced ee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ै</td>
<td>u (pronounced oo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ै</td>
<td>e (pronounced ay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ै</td>
<td>o (pronounced oh)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, ै = ga (gah)   ै = gi (hard g=gech)  ै = gu (goo)  ै = ge (gay)  ै = go (goh)

ै = cha (chah)  ै = chi (chee)  ै = chu (choo)  ै = che (chay)  ै = cho (choh)

• When a vowel is combined with a main or “root” letter, blend the two sounds together, (bat read only the consonant sound of the second suffix letter):

For example, धार = rim, “stage,degree”. You may recognize the phrase धार = धार which is read as_____ _____ (fill in the blank). It refers to the “stages on the path” to Enlightenment. (A small “dot”, called a “tsek” ( ‘ ) separates the syllables of words or phrases.)

• Occasionally, as a poetic flourish or emphasis, a syllable or word will contain two vowel sounds. To “carry” the second vowel sound the “small a” or “auchung” (  ) is used, losing it’s own “ah” sound.

For example, as you’ll soon see in your Chenrezik refuge prayer, in the phrase “We go for refuge”, the word “go” which ends every sentence in the refuge prayer, is not just the utilitarian word धार “chi” (the ध is silent) but is the more beautiful धार “chio”.

Answer: lam rim
ROWS 3 AND 4
DENTALS AND LABIALS

See it as you say it........then........Write it as you say it

Tarantula  TA

boat-hook  ThA

Decanter  DA

Nail  NA

Pot  PA

pot-(half)  PhA

Box  BA

Mouse  MA
ROWS 5 AND 6 - Fricatives, Semivowels, and Sibilants

As you look at these next two rows, you’ll notice that some of the new sounds may not be as familiar to your ear as those in the previous four rows. In English, you’re more likely to hear these new sounds in the middle or at the ends of words, rather than at the beginning of words. Consider trying to “overlearn” these two rows. Write them a few additional times, and push the flashcards more. You may need this added reinforcement because these sounds are a bit more difficult to associate with anything familiar. In addition, when learning any list, memory is best at the beginning and end of it, but weakest in the middle parts—where you are now. Also, you may find some of the letters look very similar to some of the other letters you have just recently learned. But if you add some extra practice you won’t confuse them.

APPLYING WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED: A “PRE-PRIMER” SADHANA

Now this begins to get practical - and exciting! You are ready to begin to sound out some words (with a little help). Write in the sounds of the syllables in the boxes below it. You’ll notice many silent letters in Tibetan (indicated by cheiden (And when in doubt, begin with the voweled letter).

Introduction to the Chenrezik Sadhana

Dak Dang Drowa Nam Khai Dang

(Begin with Refuge) Myself and all sentient beings, as limitless as the sky,

Dak Nam Pai Sem Dang Chen Tham Drup Dui Ne Zung TE

from this moment until

Ji Si Jang Nyap Pal Chi Bar Du

the heart of full awakening is reached,

Let’s check it out: your writing will look something like this:

Dak Dang Drowa Nam Khai Tham Dang

Nyapai Sem Chen Tham Che

Dui Ne Zung Te Ji Si Jang Chub Nyap Pal Chi Kyi Bar Du
ROWS 5 AND 6
FRICATIVES, SIBILANTS, AND SEMIVOWELS

charioTS  TSA
charioTSh  TShA
jaybirdZ  DZA
Waterpitcher  WA
treas(Za)ure  ZaA
Zebra  ZA
letter “a”  A(ah)
Yak  YA
REFUGE PRAYER

PELDEN LAMA DAMPA NAM LA KYAB SU (Column) chio
We go for refuge to all the glorious holy Lamas

Yi dam KYILO Khor GYI HLA TSOK NAM LA KYAB SU (Column) chio
We go for refuge to the assembly of dieties of the mandala of the Yidam.

SANG (Column) GYE CHOM DEN DE NAM LA KYAB SU (Column) chio
We go for refuge to the Buddhas, the Transcendent Conquerers

Dam PE CHO NAM LA KYAB SU (Column) chio
We go for refuge to the Holy Dharma

PHAK PE GENDUN NAM LA KYAB SU (Column) chio
We go for refuge to the noble Sangha

Pawo KHANDRO CHÖ KYONG SUNG MAI TSOK
We go for refuge to all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Guardians of the Dharma

Ve She KYI CHEN DANG DEN PA NAM LA KYAB SU (Column) chio
who possess the Eye of Wisdom.

KEY: PELDEN LAMA DAMPA NAM LA KYAB SU CHIO
YIDAM KYILO Khor GYI HLA TSOK NAM LA KYAB SU CHIO
SANGYE CHOM DEN DE NAM LA KYAB SU CHIO
DAMPAI CHÖ NAM LA KYAB SU CHIO
PHAKPAI GENDUN NAM LA KYAB SU CHIO
PAWOKHANDRO CHÖ KYONG SUNGMAI TSOK
YESHE KYI CHEN DANG DENPA NAM LA KYAB SU CHIO
ROWS 7 AND 8
SEMIVOWELS, SIBILANTS, AND ASPIRATES

And when you’ve memorized these, you will have learned the whole Tibetan alphabet!

See it as you say it........then........Write it as you say it

Running

Leaf

SHI

Sail

HA

A(ah)

Note:

\(\text{堰}\) is often called “large A” or “au chen” (chen is the Tibetan word for “large”) to distinguish it from

\(\text{𗔘}\) which is called “small a” or “au chung” (“chung” is the Tibetan word for “small”).