

LEARNING TO READ
THE TIBETAN SCRIPT

By David Curtis

A Tibetan Proverb

ཀ་ཁ་ག་ང་མ་ཤེས་ན།།

མི་ལུས་ཐོབ་པ་ཕྱེད་ཀ་ཡིན།།

*If one knows not the alphabet,
one has lived only half a human life.*

In the last column I discussed the coming of the Dharma to Tibet with special emphasis on the role the Tibetan language played in that process. In this column I would like to begin to teach how to actually read the Tibetan script. If an English speaker who speaks or reads no other language wishes to learn French, Italian, or German, he or she will know how to read the script and use the dictionary since all of these languages have alphabets based on the one used by the Romans, and they all have the same dictionary word order. But when learning Tibetan, we first need to learn to read a very foreign-looking script. At first glance, this might seem quite difficult. It is not, however, as impossible as it might seem because there is a very logical system of organization to the Tibetan that is unlike anything found in English or the other European languages.

Tibetan is written in a variety of different scripts. The one most commonly seen in the traditional Buddhist texts is called *u-chen* (pronounced “oo-chen”). It is also the script used in all Western Dharma center editions of practice texts when the original Tibetan is included. *U-chen* is also the script used in all the Tibetan-English dictionaries. So although it is not the first script learned by Tibetan school children (they must initially learn one that is more difficult), *u-chen* is the one most practical for Western Buddhist students to learn first.

By the way, what is often called the Tibetan alphabet is more properly termed a syllabary, for unlike the English alphabet, which is a list of letters, what we have in the Tibetan is rather a list of thirty syllables. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines a syllabary as “... a list or system of characters representing syllables and (in some languages or stages of writing) serving the purpose of an alphabet.” This is what we have in Tibetan.

Tibetan is traditionally taught with reference to a chart or matrix containing eight rows and four columns of characters, each of which is a consonant. The last row only has two characters. So, we have a total of thirty consonants. There are profound and far-reaching reasons why these thirty syllables – the thirty consonants – are arranged in this way. We will discuss this further in future columns as our exploration of Tibetan unfolds.

What I would now like to present is a simplified approach to reading the Tibetan script. For, once one knows how to read the script, the original hurdle to learning Tibetan, which in the beginning can seem so formidable, is left behind. One can then go on to acquire a basic Dharma vocabulary in Tibetan, which is so useful in becoming a better-educated Dharma practitioner. Later, one can begin to read practice texts in Tibetan. Students always find this an illuminating experience, even though it is necessarily a slow process in the beginning.

The first step then is to learn to read the thirty consonants of the syllabary. Tibetan is read left to right and top to bottom – just like English. Looking at the chart of the syllabary, we note that each of the consonants has an *A*. The sound represented by this *A* is pronounced “Ah.” This sound was taught by the Buddha in the Prajnaparamita Sutras as “... the perfection of wisdom in one letter.”

Whenever Tibetan is transcribed into English (that is, written with English or Roman letters), the letter *A* represents the sound “Ah.” When we transcribe Tibetan into

English for the purpose of approximating the sound of Tibetan, we use what are called phonetics (from the Greek word *phono* meaning “sound”). So the English letters beneath the Tibetan in the matrix in the accompanying chart are the phonetics. But when we transcribe Tibetan into English to indicate the spelling in the original Tibetan, we have what is called the transliteration (from the Latin *trans* meaning “across” and *litera* meaning “letters” – bringing the letters across from one language to another). In some languages the phonetics and the transliteration are equivalent, but this is not the case in Tibetan, so it is good to remember the distinction between phonetics and transliteration when talking about Tibetan.

Looking again at the chart, we see that below the first three syllables of the fifth row and over the last letter in that row in the syllabary there is a dividing line. This divides the chart into two sections and is extremely important. First we will discuss the nineteen consonants above this dividing line.

Above the Dividing Line. In the top portion of the syllabary we have five rows and four columns. There is a series of rules that govern the pronunciation of each of these syllables. Remember that for each of these sounds the *A* is to be pronounced like “Ah.”

The Rows. In the first row we find *KA*, *K'A*, *GA*, and *NGA*. All of these syllables are pronounced in the back of the throat. In the second row all of the syllables – *CHA*, *CH'A*, *JA*, and *NYA* – are pronounced at the roof of the mouth. In the third row, all the syllables – *TA*, *T'A*, *DA*, and *NA* – are pronounced with the tip of the tongue at the back of the teeth. All the syllables in the fourth row – *PA*, *P'A*, *BA*, and *MA* – are made at the lips. And lastly, the first three consonants of the fifth row – *TSA*, *TS'A*, and *DZA* – are pronounced at the palate again.

The Columns. Now let us look at the columns above the dividing line. All the syllables in the first column of the first

The Tibetan Syllabary

1	ཀ་	ཁ་	ག་	ང་
	KA	K'A	GA	NGA
2	ཅ་	ཆ་	ཇ་	ཉ་
	CHA	CH'A	JA	NYA
3	ཏ་	ཐ་	ད་	ན་
	TA	T'A	DA	NA
4	པ་	ཕ་	བ་	མ་
	PA	P'A	BA	MA
5	ཅ་	ཆ་	ཇ་	མ་
	TSA	TS'A	DZA	WA
6	ཞ་	ཟ་	འ་	ཡ་
	ZHA	ZA	'A	YA
7	ར་	ལ་	ཤ་	ས་
	RA	LA	SHA	SA
8	ཧ་	ཨ་		
	HA	A		

five rows – *KA*, *CHA*, *TA*, *PA*, and *TSA* – are very short with a high tone. (Don't worry, there are only two tones in Tibetan: One is high in the same manner as when we are happy to remember something and say “Oh!”; the other is a low tone as when we put our feet up at the end of a long day and say “Ah”). All the second column sounds – *K'A*, *CH'A*, *T'A*, *P'A*, and *TS'A* – are like the first sound in each row, but with the addition of aspiration or breathiness. All the third column consonants – *GA*, *JA*, *DA*, *BA* and *DZA* – are long and low. And all the fourth column sounds – *NGA*, *NYA*, *NA*, and *MA* – are long and low with a nasal quality.

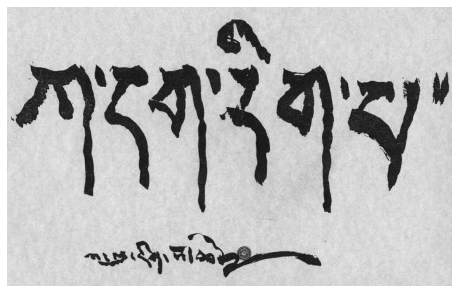
Learning Tip: One technique when learning a new body of material is to absorb it gradually in small amounts. Thoroughly master one step at a time. Begin by learning small bits thoroughly. It has been said that “repetition is the mother of mastery.” For purposes of memorization, it is far better to repeat a short section many times than to repeat something much longer only once or twice.

In working with the thirty consonants it is good, therefore, to work with one row at a time. Work left to right and top to bottom. Using a mala (the Buddhist prayer beads) and repeating each row twenty-one times while concentrating on the form of the consonants can be an effective way to learn the thirty consonants. We can learn a lot by short study sessions throughout the day.

Below the Dividing Line. Now for the syllables below the dividing line:

The first syllable in the fifth row is *WA*, and it is pronounced like “wa” in “watch.” The syllables in the sixth row – *ZHA*, *ZA*, *'A*, *YA* – all have a low tone. *ZHA* is pronounced like the “Zsa” in *Zsa Zsa Gabor*.

The first two syllables in the seventh row – *RA* and *LA* – are pronounced just like in English. The last two syllables in the seventh row – the *SHA* and the *SA* – are pronounced with a high tone.



An example of u-chen script, written by H.E. Kalu Rinpoche in his later years. This says *KA DAK RIK PA*, meaning “primordially pure awareness.”

