THE TIBETAN SCRIPT

By David Curtis

A Tibetan Proverb

यात्यार्थ्यत्वेशः भाष्यार्थः भाष्यार्थः

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 call *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





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."

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.

The two letters of the eight row – HA and A – are each pronounced with a high tone.

So those are the thirty consonants and how to pronounce them. They make up what is commonly called the 'Tibetan alphabet,' but what we will call the 'Tibetan syllabary.' As already pointed out, each of them is a syllable unto itself. But what is more, many of them are also words. So now we can talk just a bit about vocabulary.

KA is the very first of the consonants, and because it is the first, it can mean "primordial, the earliest, the first in a series." This is similar to the way we use the English a or the Greek letter alpha. NGA, the hardest consonant for English speakers to pronounce, is, ironically, the Tibetan word for "I" or "me." We will talk more about vocabulary in subsequent columns. y



David Curtis is founder the Tibetan Language Institute, a non-profit 501 (c) (3) in 1996. He now presents introductory classes and reading seminars on Tibetan throughout America.



TIBETAN LANGUAGE INSTITUTE

A non-profit educational organization

TIBETAN LANGUAGE STUDY MATERIALS

Introduction to the Tibetan Language, Beginners' Package Pre-primer, Level I manual, audio-CD or cassette, easy-to-use Flashcards, Tibetan-English Dictionary. Price \$121.00.

NEW! DVD of Level I Course

David Curtis's highly successful course on learning to read Tibetan, condensed into a three-hour presentation, in a studio recorded 2 DVD set. Price \$45.00

Tibetan Vocabulary Flashcards and Dharma Flashcards. Two inspiring sets to help acquire essential vocabulary. Price \$35.00 ea

Other Packages: Level II Package, Reader Packages I and II

Also Available: Grammars, Translation Workbooks, Cassette tapes, DVD's, CD's, Print and Electronic Dictionaries, and an extensive collection of Dharma books at our website bookstore. Free study aids also available at website

SUMMER SEMINAR 2006

In the Beautiful Rocky Mountains of Montana: July 31-Aug 18 (Levels I, II, III) Enjoy learning Tibetan in a supportive, Dharma environment.

OTHER UPCOMING LANGUAGE SEMINARS

West Coast: Los Angeles East Coast: 9th Intensive in Rochester, NY, November Lev I: Oct. 13-15 Lev II: Oct. 20-22

TELEPHONE TUTORIALS IN CLASSICAL TIBETAN
Transform your relationship with the Dharma
Learn Tibetan with David Curtis, an excellent teacher with 13 years of experience.

www.tibetanlanguage.org

Telephone: 406-961-5131 Email: info@tibetanlanguage.org PO Box 2037, Hamilton, MT 59840

BUDDHA

Last time we presented the word jang chub (pronounced "jang choob"), the word that is commonly translated as "enlightenment." We saw that its two syllables mean "purified" and "perfected" respectively. Our new word for this lesson is the Tibetan word for Buddha, sang gyay (pronounced "song gyay"). When we look at the etymology for this word, we see that it is closely related to the word for enlightenment. Sang means "awakened" (as from the sleep of ignorance) or "purified" (as in purified of all obscurations). Gyay means "expanded, blossomed, fully developed." So, the two syllables combine to mean "one such as Shakyamuni Buddha, who has purified all the obscurations (sang) and who has developed fully all the qualities of enlightenment (gyay)."

FPMT'S INTERPRETER TRAINING PROGRAM

Some of our readers will be familiar with the Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo Translator Program (LRZTP), designed to train non-native Tibetan speakers as Tibetan language interpreters. The LRZTP is a four-year program: two years spent learning Tibetan (colloquial, some honorific, Dharma terms, and the written language) in Dharamsala, India; then two years spent studying and working as an interpreter to a geshe resident in an FPMT center.

The LRZTP is generally accepted as one of the world's preeminent programs for fast, intensive training in the Tibetan language, and specifically in training as an interpreter for the Dharma. So far there have been four LRZTPs, under the expert tutelage of Geshe Sherab Gyatso, and a fifth is in the planning stages.

There are 22 LRZTP graduates, of whom 14 are currently working in FPMT centers worldwide. Not only are LRZTP graduates providing the essential service of bringing Tibetan geshes' teachings to their students and serving their center, some graduates have also become excellent translators of Buddhist

For more information about the LRZTP, email: lrztp@vsnl.com.