

The Seven Elements of Tibetan

This is the third in a series of articles on learning to read the Tibetan language. In the first article I discussed the coming of the Dharma to Tibet from the Noble Country, as the Tibetans respectfully called India – a way of paying homage to the homeland of the Buddha and his teachings. In that article I also talked about the development of the Tibetan language as a vehicle for the promulgation of Buddhism in Tibet. In the second column I introduced the first step of the seven-step process of actually learning to read the Tibetan script – the thirty consonants of the Tibetan alphabet (more properly called a syllabary). The purpose of this series of columns is to learn to read the Tibetan script. Later we will learn to use the Tibetan dictionary. Finally, we will undertake Tibetan grammar, syntax, and translation. Learning to read the script involves a seven-step process. In this in article I will illustrate the seven elements of learning to read Tibetan.

Tibetan is written as a series of syllables. It is not divided into words, just syllables! The syllables are separated by dots. The Tibetan word for this dot is *tshake* (rhymes with *sake*, as in “for the sake of ...”). The syllables may be comprised of seven elements, some of which may be stacked on top of each other. In addition, the syllables may be four elements in length and stacked four elements high, and they may contain seven elements. Learning these elements and how they function constitutes the seven-step process of learning to read the Tibetan script.

In their Western form, sadhana texts usually have three lines: a line of Tibetan, a line which gives the pronuncia-

tion, and a line of translation. The pronunciation in English letters below the Tibetan is what is known as “the phonetics.” This term comes from the Greek word for sound. Reading phonetics allows people who do not know Tibetan to practice “in Tibetan.” It is important here to distinguish this word *phonetics* from the term *transliteration* with which it is often confused. *Transliteration* is a term

referring to the writing of Tibetan words using English letters. Since very many Tibetan words have silent letters, the transliteration can be a guide to pronunciation only for people who are already able to read the Tibetan script. Transliteration is used in many Dharma books published in English. It is found in the text, in glossaries, footnotes, and bibliographies. It is a very valuable tool for Tibetan scholars and students of Tibetan and the Dharma. It enables them to know exactly which Tibetan word has been translated or is being referred to. This is in contrast to the phonetics which only provide the approximate pronunciation.

Once we can read the script and use the dictionary, we can study the Dharma in an entirely new way. This new

ability gives deeper insight into the Dharma. For even as beginners in the language we can study sadhana texts by analyzing them word-by-word with the help of the existing translation and a dictionary. Furthermore, a few students have told me that being able to practice their sadhanas by reading the actual Tibetan itself rather than by relying on the phonetics makes their texts luminous.

THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF TIBETAN SYLLABLES

བསྐྱབས་

བ་	Ba	Prefix
ས་	Sa	Superscript
ག་	Ga	Root
ཅ་	Ra and U	Subscript and Vowel
བ་	Ba	Suffix
ས་	Sa	Second Suffix

PHONETICS: DROOP
TRANSLITERATION: BSGRUBS

Now we will look at the seven elements of Tibetan syllables

A syllable may contain the following elements: root, suffix, second suffix, vowel, subscript, prefix, and superscript. It is useful to remember these in this order, since the order is essential to using the Tibetan dictionary (a topic we will cover in the future). There is a paradigm word commonly used to illustrate these seven elements. This word is shown in Figure 1. It is pronounced *droop*. The transliteration is *bsgrubs*! *Droop* is the phonetics; *bsgrubs* is the transliteration. *Droop* is the past tense of the verb meaning, among other things, “to accomplish”, “to complete”, or “to attain.” In a Dharma context it can also mean “to practice.” In the word *droop* we see a cluster or constellation of all the seven elements followed by a dot, the *tshake*.

Referring to Figure 1, let us consider the seven elements in the order as they occur in the word. The first of the seven elements is the consonant *ba*, which here functions as a prefix. It is followed by a stack of elements. The top letter of the stack is the consonant *sa*, here functioning as a superscript. Below it is a *ga* which is the root letter. Below the root is a curved stroke. This is an abbreviated *ra*—it is the subscript. Beneath this is a hook which is a vowel sign equivalent to the English vowel sound *oo* (as in “the flowers *droop* out of the vase”). The next element is another *ba* which this time functions as a suffix. Finally we come to the seventh element, the consonant *sa*, the second suffix.

The reason *droop* is transliterated as *bsgrubs* is because transliteration is a letter-by-letter substitution of English let-

ters for Tibetan letters. For instance, the *ba* is transliterated as a *b*. We will return to the subject of transliteration in a later column.

Notice that when we speak of prefixes and suffixes in Tibetan, we are referring to individual consonants, not syllables as in the English *un-* or *inter-* or *-ness*. Also, the prefixes and suffixes in Tibetan do not always carry meaning as in English, but are an integral part of the syllable as a whole.

Our paradigm word *droop/bsgrubs* also illustrates another feature of Tibetan. Each syllable can only ever have one stack. Further, if there is a stack it always contains the root letter. Thus Tibetan syllables may be four letters in length and the root letter may have three elements stacked with it for a maximum of seven elements. In the last article we discussed the first of the elements, the thirty consonants. In the next article we will turn to the five vowels, the next of the seven elements. If you would like to, reciting the thirty consonants will certainly make following along later much easier. A little *droop/bsgrubs* (practice) now will make a big difference down the line.

[Reference to my book, *Introduction to Tibetan Language*,

the free study aids on my website at www.tibetanlanguage.org, and the two previous articles in this *Mandala* series might be helpful in following this discussion.] ●

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བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའ་

JANG CHUB SEM PA

BODHISATTVA

The Sanskrit word *Bodhisattva* has now become an English word and can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The Tibetans translated this word, which in Sanskrit literally means “enlightenment being,” using four syllables *jang chub sem pa*. In our last article, we discussed *jang chub* (pronounced *jahng choob*), stating that it can be translated as “enlightenment.” *Sem* means “mind” and *pa* means “heroic.” So a Bodhisattva can be understood as a heroic being with his/her mind set on enlightenment. The Bodhisattva is heroic because he/she is focused on bringing every single being in the universe to complete and perfect Buddhahood.