

Vowels

-There are five vowel sounds in Tibetan

༡ ཨ

༢ ཀི ཀུ gi ku

༣ ཤཱ ཀུ shab kyu

༤ རྩོ འོ dreng bo

༥ རྩོ འོ na ro

-"a" is the inherent vowel sign and is not signified by a separate character

Surmounted Letters

-there are three surmounted letters ར་ལ་ས།

-Surmounted letters are used mainly for orthographic (spelling) purposes (to distinguish between different words that sound the same)

-Surmounted letters are neither pronounced nor affect pronunciation when attached to the

consonants of the first column, so ཀ་ཀ་ཁྱ་ཁྱ། are all pronounced the same. note: how the

surmounted letter and the root letter shrink to be the size of a normal letter

-they are attached to the top of the root letter and start below the head line.

Rules for surmounted letters:

1. Column 1=no change
2. Column 2=they don't go on column 2 letters.
3. Column 3=loses their aspiration and they become the same sound as the wylie transliteration would suggest.

ག་ = ga, like god with an American accent.

ཁྱ་ = ja, like job with an American accent.

ཁ་ = da, like dog with an American accent.

བ་ = ba, like bog with an American accent.

ཇ་ = dza, like dzog with an American accent.

4. Column 4= makes the sound stronger and higher (a bit like having "!" after the letter)

Some examples of words with surmounted letters:

རྟེང་མ།

རྟག་བ།

རོ་རྩ།

ལྷག་ས།

ལྷོག་གུང།

ལྷ་བ།

སྟེང་པོ།

སྟེན།

སྟོང་པ་ཉིད།

*in a two syllable word where བ་ is the second syllable of the word it is always pronounced wa.

Suffix Letters.

-There are ten suffix letters: ག་ང་ད་ན་བ་མ་ར་ལ་འ་ས།

-Six are pronounced as expected ie they are sounded and don't alter the pronunciation of the

vowel: ག་ང་བ་མ་ར་འ།

-two effect the pronunciation of the vowel but are not sounded themselves ད་ས།

-both da and sa produce an umlauting of the vowels a,u and o (i and e generally dont change)

ཨ ah becomes □ or eh like in edge

ཨྱ oo becomes Ü which is like the u sound in surprise

ཨོ o becomes ö or oh as in push pronounced with the lips fully rounded.

-in addition to this ཅ་ produces a glottal stop or a radical shortening of the syllable. ཅིང

-in addition ཅ་ produces a falling off of the sound of the syllable. eg ཅིས་=by: the book is by John.

-The final two suffixes ཅ་ལ། have the same effect on the vowels as the previous two but in

addition to this they are pronounced. They produce neither the glottal stop nor the falling off of the sound.

Prefix Letters

-There are five prefix letters ག་ད་བ་མ་འ་

-They are like the "k" in know and knife; they are silent.

-The rules for pronunciation are the same as for the surmounted letters. That is: no effect on the first and second column, the third column becomes the Wylie sounds without aspiration (the American accent effect as in the surmounted letters). Column four has the exclamation mark effect.

-of the five two have a special effect; they are: མ་འ་ The special effect is called "pre-nasalisation"

-pre-nasalisation - as the name suggests - has the effect of introducing a subtle nasalisation (from a corresponding nasal in column four) prior to the sounding of the root letter. It is not the sound of the prefix consonant, they are silent.

-So how do we know which nasal will form the preceding sound? There are four nasals in column four: ང་ which is guttural, ཅ་ which is palatal, ཇ་ which is dental and མ་ which is labial. Each as a different sound and place of articulation. To establish which one to use we match the place of articulation of the root consonant to the place of articulation of the nasal. An example of this

would be the Tibetan word for Sangha. དགོ་ འདུན། which is pronounced ge-ndun. If the འ་

prefix were missing the word would be pronounced ge-dun. Here we are only discussing the second syllable "ndun". The 'a prefix becomes the "n" sound before dun. Why is it n and not m? Because the root letter ཇ་ is a dental and therefore its corresponding pre-nasal is dental. The only nasal which is dental is "na".

-Pre-nasalisation is heard most strongly in a two syllable word where the first syllable has an open vowel which is to say that it does not have a suffix. An example of this is our example above for Sangha.

-An exception to the rule which is quite common is where da prefixes to ba such as the word

དབང། which means power or empowerment. Here the word is pronounced wang and not bang

as would be expected. It is always the case that when da prefixes root letter ba it is pronounced wa (strong and high tone)

-Another exception is where ba is prefixed by da and subjoined by ya as in དབྱས། which is the

word for summer. Here it is pronounced yar and not char or war as might be expected. Root letter ba prefixed by da and subjoined by ya is pronounced ya.

-when ba ་ is used as the second or third syllable in a two or three syllable word it is pronounced hightone wa and not low tone pa as is expected.

Here are some examples of words using prefix letters taken from the first two lines of the holy Heart Sutra.

འདི་སྐད། thus

གཅིག། one

བཙུག་ལྷན་འདས། blessed one=Tathagata skt.

དག་སྲོང་། fully ordained monk=Bhikshu skt.

དག་འདུན། spiritual community=Sangha skt.

Subjoined Letters

-There are five subjoined letters (only the first three are common): ཡ་ར་ལ་ལ་ལ།
they are called ya tak, ra tak, la tak, wazur and a chung respectively.

-when subjoined to ka (or other consonants) they generally look like this: ཀྱ་གྱ་གྱ་གྱ་

གྱ།

-when ya is subjoined to a consonant it adds its own sound to the end of the root letter, such as; གྱ་ which is pronounced gya, brazilian.

-The whole of the fourth row are not pronounced as explained above, they jump up two rows to the second row. So གྱ་ = ཅ་ གྱ་ = ཀ་ གྱ་ = ཇ་ གྱ་ = ཉ་

-when ra is subjoined to another consonant it goes to the retroflex sound of that column. If that root

letter also has a head letter then it will have the effect of the root letter as well.

-There are two exceptions ལྱ་ and ལྲ་ are pronounced sa and ma as if the ra tak weren't there.

-when la is subjoined to any consonant the root consonant is pronounced high la such as ལྱ་ལྱ་

ལྱ་

all of these are pronounced high tone la.

-an exception is when la is subjoined to za, ལྱ་ in which case it is pronounced da with a slight

prenasal. Such as the common Tibetan name or the word for moon ལྷ་བ།

-subjoined wa །མ is not pronounced and does not effect pronunciation. །ད་དྲ་ are pronounced exactly the same.

-subjoined །འ is only used to transliterate Sanskrit and is used to denote the long a vowel in that language. When subjoined to ka it looks like this །ཀའ

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