

# A Practical Guide to the Pronunciation of Standard Tibetan

What follows is a *vade mecum* using common English equivalents to enable non-tibetanists to navigate adequately the transliterated Tibetan names and terminology in this book. For a more exact phonetic description of Standard Tibetan (*bod kyi spyi skad*), the language spoken around Lhasa, see Tournadre and Dorje 2003, 32-41. For simplicity, we will not take up the three tones of Lhasa Tibetan in any detail. The system of Tibetan transliteration that we have adopted is that of T.V. Wylie 1959.

- §1. The vowels, a, e, i, o, u, when they are not followed by consonants, are short and pronounced as follows:
- a: similar to a in English father.
  - e: similar to e in set.
  - i: similar to ee in free.
  - o: similar to o in so.
  - u: similar to u in sue.
- §2. When they are followed by the consonants d, n, l, or s, the vowels a, o and u are pronounced like counterparts with umlauts, respectively, ä, ö, ü. The consonant d leaves the preceding vowel short and is itself silent; l and s lengthen the vowel and are themselves silent; n is pronounced.
- §3. Tibetan consonants are generally pronounced as follows:
- k: completely unaspirated, similar to the English k in skip.
  - kh: aspirated, similar to a strongly pronounced c, as when one exclaims that something is utter claptrap.
  - g: similar to Tibetan k, but with a low tone vowel. When preceded by other consonants it is voiced, like g in gone.
  - ng: similar to the first ng in singalong.
  - c: completely unaspirated, similar to the ch in speech.
  - ch: aspirated, similar to a strongly pronounced ch in cheese.

- j: similar to Tibetan c, but with a low tone vowel. When preceded by other consonants it is voiced, like j in jab.
- ny: similar to n in newspaper as pronounced in British English.
- t: completely unaspirated, similar to the t in stag.
- th: aspirated, similar to a strongly pronounced t in tap.
- d: similar to Tibetan t, but with a low tone vowel. When preceded by other consonants it is voiced, like d in dab.
- n: similar to n in not.
- p: completely unaspirated, similar to p in spin.
- ph: aspirated, similar to a strongly pronounced p in pan.
- b: similar to Tibetan p, but with a low tone vowel. When preceded by other consonants it is voiced, like b in ball.
- m: similar to m in English, e.g., man.
- ts: completely unaspirated, similar to ts in treats.
- tsh: aspirated, similar to a strongly pronounced ts in tsar.
- dz: similar to Tibetan ts, but with a low tone vowel. When preceded by other consonants it is voiced, like ds in lads.
- wa: similar to w in want.
- zh: similar to sh in shop, but with a low tone vowel.
- z: similar to s in same, but with a low tone vowel.
- ‘: not pronounced.
- y: similar to y in yet.
- r: similar to r in read, slightly rolled.
- l: similar to l in led.
- sh: similar to sh in shop, but with a high tone vowel.
- s: similar to s in same, but with a high tone vowel.
- h: similar to h in hard.
- §4. g, d, b, m, ‘, r, l, s, br, and bs, when they precede another consonant, are not pronounced. Thus, for example, Tibetan sgo and mgo are homonyms and are pronounced like English go.
- §5. kl, gl, bl, rl, sl, brl, and bsl are all pronounced like Tibetan l. Thus, for example, blo and glo are homonyms and are pronounced like English lo. The combination zl, however, is the exception: it is pronounced d.
- §6. kr, skr, bskr, tr, pr, dpr, and spr are all pronounced like an unaspirated retroflex t, like the retroflex ṭ in Sanskrit. Thus, for example, skra is pronounced like Sanskrit ṭa.

- §7. khr, ‘khr, mkhr, phr, and ‘phr are all pronounced like an aspirated retroflex t, like the retroflex ṭh in Sanskrit. Thus, ‘phro is pronounced like Sanskrit ṭho.
- §8. gr, dr, and br, unpreceded by other consonants, are pronounced like a low-toned ṭ, while dgr, bgr, mgr, ‘gr, sgr, bsgr, ‘dr, dbr, ‘br, and sbr are pronounced like the retroflex ḍ in Sanskrit. The combinations sr and mr are the exceptions: sr is simply pronounced like s and mr is pronounced like m.
- §9. py, dpy, spy, by are unaspirated and pronounced like Tibetan c. ‘by and sby are voiced and pronounced like Tibetan j. phy and ‘phy are aspirated and pronounced like ch.
- §10. In the combinations ky, khy and gy, both letters are pronounced distinctly and normally. However, in dgy, bgy, brgy, mgy and ‘gy the g is voiced and low tone. The combinations my, smy, and dmy are exceptional and are all pronounced like Tibetan ny.
- §11. The ten consonants g, ng, d, n, b, m, ‘, r, l, s and the combinations gs, ngs, bs, and ms occur at the end of syllables; the s in gs is not pronounced but has the effect of lengthening the vowel. g is hardly pronounced but shortens the vowel. d, l, s are themselves silent. Vocalic changes a → ä, o → ö, u → ü and lengthening of vowels occur as described in §2.