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སྒྲུབ་དབུ་།

**A Beginning Textbook
of
Lhasa Tibetan**

Ellen Bartee

Nyima Droma

National Press for Tibetan Studies

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LESSON ONE

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The Tibetan Alphabet consists of 30 root letters and four vowels. Each root letter has an inherent 'a' sound. When the vowels are added above or below the root letter, they change the 'a' (as in 'pot') to either 'e' (as in 'ray'), 'i' (as in 'bee'), 'o' (as in 'so'), or 'u' (as in 'shoe').

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ཏ ta	ཐ tha	ཏ <u>tha</u>	ཊ <u>na</u>
པ pa	ཕ pha	བ <u>pha</u>	མ <u>ma</u>
ཙ tsa	ཛ tsha	ཎ <u>tsha</u>	ཤ <u>wa</u>
ཞ <u>sha</u>	ཟ <u>sa</u>	འ a	ཡ ya
ར <u>ra</u>	ལ <u>la</u>	ཤ sha	ས sa
ཧ ha	ཨ a		

PREFACE

The goal of this textbook is to teach the student how to speak the Lhasa variety of Tibetan. We have assumed a general familiarity with the writing system and have only included three chapters as a basic overview of the alphabet and rules of spelling¹. Because the starting point of this book is very simple, it provides an excellent opportunity for the student to immediately rely on Tibetan script rather than romanized script. This, we believe, will help to immerse the student in Tibetan. Hence, no romanized script is provided and the student is encouraged to practice writing as well as speaking every day. However, this textbook can still be used for those who are learning the Tibetan writing system concurrent to speaking.

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The core lessons in this textbook contain a limited number of vocabulary items (about 700). Most students will find this a sufficient start as normal everyday contact will also bring opportunities to learn new words. In the process of acquiring vocabulary, it is important to do so in context and we have tried to contextualize the vocabulary included in this book. Depending on the student's speed, we recommend that two to four class hours be spent on each lesson for a duration of roughly 18 weeks.

¹ There are several textbooks that give a good overview of the writing system. For those who read Chinese, look at *zangwen pinyin jiaocai* (*bod.yig..gi sgra.sbyor slob.deb*) and the first chapter of *lasa kouyu* (*lha.sa'i kha skad klog.deb*) which provides an overview of all the different rules of spelling. For English readers, try the first chapter of *Modern Tibetan Language, Vol. 1* by Thonden Lobsang.

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CONTENTS

Preface.....	vii
Lesson One	The Tibetan alphabet..... 9
Lesson Two	Prefixes and suffixes..... 13
Lesson Three	Superscribed and subjoined letters..... 17
Lesson Four	What is this?..... 23
	ཅད་ མ་ཅད་ ཅད་པས
Lesson Five	What nationality are you?..... 31
	ཡིན། ཡིན་པས།
Lesson Six	Where are you from?..... 37
	ནས ག་ནས གི་/འི
Lesson Seven	Tell me about yourself and your family 45
	ཡོད། མེད། ཡོག་ཅད། ཡོག་མ་ཅད།
	ཡོད་པས། ཡོག་ཅད་པས།
Lesson Eight	Where are you going? What do you do?..... 55
	honorifics and འགོ་ ཕྱིན
Lesson Nine	What time is it?..... 67
	འདྲག་ ཅད། རེ་རེ
Lesson Ten	Eating and drinking 79
	གྲབས་ ཅང་ དགོས་
Lesson Eleven	Everyday activities..... 89
	གི་ཡོད།
Lesson Twelve	Making plans and setting a date..... 95
	review of verbs and གི་/འི
Lesson Thirteen	Going to Lhasa..... 105
	ཕྱི་ ཕྱིས་ ཡག་ ན
Lesson Fourteen	What are you doing?..... 115
	གག་ མཐའ་ གྱུང་ རྒྱུང་ གག་ and the ergative marker གིས་
Lesson Fifteen	Arriving in Lhasa..... 129
	དགོས་ ཤེས་ བྱུང་

Lesson Sixteen	Tibetan tea.....	139
	ཐུག་པ་ཏང་ཕྱེད་	
Lesson Seventeen	Visiting a doctor.....	147
	པ་འདྲ་རྩ་རྩ་	
Lesson Eighteen	At the store.....	155
	adjective forms (ཁོ་ལོས་རྩ་རྩ་), comparative marker ལས་	
	and the question particle ལོས་	
Appendix I:	Answers for practice work.....	163
Appendix II:	A brief look at Tibetan Grammar.....	181
Appendix III:	A note on Verbalizers.....	193
Appendix IV:	Honorifics in Lhasa Tibetan.....	197
Appendix V:	A brief overview of some important pronunciation points.....	207
	Tibetan-English Glossary.....	211
	English-Tibetan Glossary.....	241
	Bibliography.....	267

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This book is accompanied by 2 cassettes that were recorded by three speakers from Lhasa city and one speaker from Lhokar. Before beginning a new lesson, whether studying with a tutor or in a classroom, it is important to listen to the tape a few times without attempting to say any of the new words or phrases. This will help fix the proper pronunciation and rhythm of the language in the mind of the learner before bad habits are subconsciously formed.

The appendices include several sections that we think will be useful: answers to all the practice work given in each lesson (Appendix I); a short introduction to Tibetan grammar that covers some of the most difficult constructions the student will encounter when first learning Tibetan (Appendix II); a general overview of verbalizers in Tibetan (Appendix III); a paper on honorific usage in LT (Appendix IV) and a very brief reminder of some spelling rules that affect pronunciation (Appendix V). In addition, there are both Tibetan-English and English-Tibetan glossaries to help the student easily look up words as well as an annotated bibliography to give the students areas for further study.

Finally, we would like to thank the many people who helped check this book and/or who provided valuable advice and help as we were writing it. Thanks to Ken Hugoniot, Ngawang Pintsok, Geoff Bailey, Yangchen D. Tsatultsang, and Professor Hu Tan for their corrections, suggestions and ideas. The Tibetan in this book was first produced using Wylie Edit which was developed by Chet Wood. Tashi Tsering, computer whiz, introduced a few changes in the font and managed all the technical difficulties. Tsering Thar kindly allowed us to use his Macintosh while working on the book at the Tibetan Research Center in Beijing.

We hope this book is helpful to you.

Ellen Bartee
Nyima Droma

September, 1998

Revised in September, 2000

སློབ་ཚན་དང་པོ།

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ཅ tsa	ཆ tsha	ཇ <u>tsha</u>	ཉ <u>wa</u>
ཞ <u>sha</u>	ཟ <u>sa</u>	འ <u>a</u>	ཡ <u>ya</u>
ར <u>ra</u>	ལ <u>la</u>	ཤ sha	ས sa
ཧ ha	ཨ a		

ཡི་གེ་འབྲི་སྟངས། WRITING ORDER

It is very important to write each letter in the order and direction that is typically used by Tibetans. The general direction is left to write and top to bottom. In the chart below, each letter is written one stroke at a time for you. (calligraphy by ཨ་རྒྱ་ལྷོ།).

।	१	२	३
।	४	५	६
।	७	८	९
।	१०	११	१२
।	१३	१४	१५
।	१६	१७	१८
।	१९	२०	२१
।	२२	२३	२४
।	२५	२६	२७
।	२८	२९	३०
।	३१	३२	३३
।	३४	३५	३६
।	३७	३८	३९
।	४०	४१	४२
।	४३	४४	४५
।	४६	४७	४८
।	४९	५०	५१
।	५२	५३	५४
।	५५	५६	५७
।	५८	५९	६०
।	६१	६२	६३
।	६४	६५	६६
।	६७	६८	६९
।	७०	७१	७२
।	७३	७४	७५
।	७६	७७	७८
।	७९	८०	८१
।	८२	८३	८४
।	८५	८६	८७
।	८८	८९	९०
।	९१	९२	९३
।	९४	९५	९६
।	९७	९८	९९
।	१००	१०१	१०२
।	१०३	१०४	१०५
।	१०६	१०७	१०८
।	१०९	११०	१११
।	११२	११३	११४
।	११५	११६	११७
।	११८	११९	१२०
।	१२१	१२२	१२३
।	१२४	१२५	१२६
।	१२७	१२८	१२९
।	१३०	१३१	१३२
।	१३३	१३४	१३५
।	१३६	१३७	१३८
।	१३९	१४०	१४१
।	१४२	१४३	१४४
।	१४५	१४६	१४७
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।	२१७	२१८	२१९
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।	२२३	२२४	२२५
।	२२६	२२७	२२८
।	२२९	२३०	२३१
।	२३२	२३३	२३४
।	२३५	२३६	२३७
।	२३८	२३९	२४०
।	२४१	२४२	२४३
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।	२५९	२६०	२६१
।	२६२	२६३	२६४
।	२६५	२६६	२६७
।	२६८	२६९	२७०
।	२७१	२७२	२७३
।	२७४	२७५	२७६
।	२७७	२७८	२७९
।	२८०	२८१	२८२
।	२८३	२८४	२८५
।	२८६	२८७	२८८
।	२८९	२९०	२९१
।	२९२	२९३	२९४

དབྱངས་བཞི། THE FOUR VOWELS¹

Each vowel has a name based on its shape². The chart below indicates each vowel as seen in combination with the root letter ཨ:

ཨི	ཨུ	ཨེ	ཨོ
གི་གུ	ཞབས་ཀུ	འགྲེང་པོ	ན་རྩོ
'curve'	'foot hook'	'upright'	'nose horns'

ཡི་གེ་སྒྲིག་སྤངས། SPELLING STYLE

Syllables in Tibetan can be as simple as one root letter (for example, ཨ 'I') or as complex as a combination of seven elements (one of which is a vowel). Each syllable is spelled in a fixed manner. Learning how to spell aloud is crucial for remembering how to spell words on paper. The basic order is left to right until reaching the root letter, then top to down, and continuing left to right until the syllable (or word) is completed. Listen carefully to the tape several times³ and then repeat the following syllables after the speaker (you will have to stop the tape):

Root letter	Vowel	Word	Meaning
ཨ	གི་གུ	མི	'person'
ང	ཞབས་ཀུ	ངུ	'to cry'
ད	འགྲེང་པོ	དེ	'that'
ཞ	ན་རྩོ	ཞོ	'yoghurt'

¹ Of course, there are many more vowel *sounds* in Tibetan, but only four vowel glyphs.

² From *The Classical Tibetan Language* by Stephan Beyer, p. 45.

³ Research has shown that students who first listen to a native speaker many times before attempting to speak, tend to have better pronunciation and intonation than those who do not. Part of the reason for this is that the student can internalize the correct pronunciation and rhythm of the language before falling into bad habits of production. In addition, being able to first listen reduces the potential stress of language learning that some students may encounter.

འདྲ་སྒྲིག་ PRACTICE

A. Listen at least three times to the alphabet before attempting to repeat after the speaker.

B. Listen to the tape and circle the letter you hear.

- | | | |
|----------|------------|----------|
| 1. ཁ ཀ ཁ | 2. ཀ ཅ ཀ ར | 3. ཅ ཅ བ |
| 4. བ བ བ | 5. བ ར བ ར | 6. ཅ ཀ ར |
| | | 7. བ ར |

C. Listen to the tape and write the syllables that you hear spelled.

- | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
| 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. |

འདྲ་སྒྲིག་གི་ཡོད་པ་མ། DO YOU KNOW?

A person travelling across Tibet will not only notice unique cultural features that distinguish each area, but will also note unique linguistic features. Traditionally, Tibet is divided into three broad dialect groupings: Central (which includes Lhasa Tibetan), Khams and Amdo. Within each of these, there are many smaller dialect subgroups. There can be great differences among these dialects, to the extent that some are mutually unintelligible. However, literate Tibetans all over Tibet use the same written form and can read the same documents. The reading style will vary according to the local dialect and the manner in which they have been taught to read. A person from Amdo for example, most likely will not distinguish any tones in their reading, unlike a person from Lhasa. The person from Lhasa, on the other hand, will not read any initial consonant clusters, unlike the person from Amdo. So even though they may not understand each other when speaking, literate Tibetans can understand each other through writing.

སློབ་ཚན་གཉིས་པ།

LESSON TWO

In this lesson, you will learn the possible suffixes and prefixes in Tibetan

རྗེས་འདུག་ FIRST SUFFIXES

Ten of the root letters can also function as suffixes. These are ཁྱ ས ཏ ཐ བ མ འ ར ལ and སྔ. We will briefly discuss some of the consequences of pronunciation when these suffixes follow a root letter.

I. Tonal changes

Generally, the suffix ཁྱ causes a high tone to become high-falling and a low-rising tone to become low-rising-falling. Compare the following syllables:

ཐ — ཐྱ ཐ — ཐྱ ར — རྱ

II. Final consonant

The suffixes མ and ས are pronounced at the end of the syllable. For example:

ཐས	'barley beer'
སས	'and'
ལམ	'mother' (honorific)

III. Vowel changes

A. The suffixes ཏ ཐ ལ and སྔ not only make the vowel of the root letter slightly longer, but also change it in the following ways:

a --> ε (as in English *bet*)
o --> ø (as in French *seul*)
u --> y (as in German *füllen*)

In addition, ཐ causes the vowel to become nasalized. When root letters include the vowels 'i' or 'e', there is no pronunciation change. Listen to the following examples on the tape:

ཆ -- ཆད	ཐ -- ཐད	ཡ -- ཡད	ཉ -- ཉད	ར -- རད
ཕ -- ཕད	ད -- དད	ལ -- ལད	ཆ -- ཆད	ལ -- ལད
བ -- བལ	ས -- སལ	ཤ -- ཤལ	ས -- སལ	ཟ -- ཟལ
ང -- ངས	ཚ -- ཚས	ར -- རས	ཞ -- ཞས	མ -- མས

B. The suffix ། is pronounced as an unreleased 'p' at the end of the syllable (that is, your mouth should stay closed after pronouncing it). When it follows an open vowel, the 'a' changes to a schwa (like the 'u' in the English word 'cup')⁴.

ཁབ	'needle'
དབ	'book'
ཡབ	'father' (honorific)

C. The suffixes ར and ལ cause the syllable to lengthen. Sometimes ར adds a slight 'r' sound⁵:

ཡར	'up'
པར	'photo'
དགའར	'to be happy'

ཡང་འདྲུག SECOND SUFFIX

The suffix འ also functions as a 'second suffix' and can occur after four root letters: ཁ ང བ and མ. Listen to the pronunciation differences:

⁴ When ། is the last syllable in a word, it is typically pronounced as 'wa'.

⁵ This is especially noticeable with older speakers.

ཁ	ཁམ	ཁམས
ས	སང	སངས
ཐ	ཐབ	ཐབས
ལ	ལག	ལགས

ཕྱིན་འདུག PREFIXES

There are five prefixes that can occur before a variety of root letters:

Prefix	Root letters
ག	ཅ ཏ ཅ ། ས ཞ ཟ ཏ ཏ ཡ
ད	ཀ པ ག ཐ ང མ
བ	ཀ ཅ ཏ ཅ ། ས ཞ ཟ ག ཏ
མ	ཁ ཏ ཐ ཏ ག ཏ ཏ ང ཏ ཏ
འ	ཁ ཏ ཐ ཏ ཏ ག ཏ ཏ ཏ

The pronunciation of some root letters is affected by the prefix. When ཅ མ ཏ ཡ are prefixed, they change from low to high tone. When ག ཏ ཏ ཏ are prefixed they change from being aspirated to being unaspirated. When ཀ ཅ ཏ པ ཅ are prefixed, their pronunciation does not change.

ཡི་གེ་སྒྲིག་སྤངས SPELLING STYLE

Each prefix is pronounced with -wo/-o before the root letter and then the finally the whole syllable. For example:

'yak'	ག་འོག + ཡ + ག = གཡག
'to be happy'	ད་འོག + ག + འ = དགའ
'to send out'	བ་འོག + ཏ + ང = བཏང