

“Studying Tibetan is practicing the Dharma!”

The Four Subscripts, Continued

By David Curtis

THE SIXTEEN WAZURS

ཀ	KA WA-ZUR	KA
ཀ'	K'A WA-ZUR	K'A
ག	GA WA-ZUR	GA
ག'	CHA WA-ZUR	CHA
ཉ	NYA WA-ZUR	NYA
ཏ	TA WA-ZUR	TA
ཏ'	DA WA-ZUR	DA
ཐ	TSA WA-ZUR	TSA
ཐ'	TS'A WA-ZUR	TS'A
ཇ	ZHA WA-ZUR	ZHA
ཇ'	ZA WA-ZUR	ZA
ར	RA WA-ZUR	RA
ལ	LA WA-ZUR	LA
ཤ	SHA WA-ZUR	SHA
ས	SA WA-ZUR	SA
ཧ	HA WA-ZUR	HA

Figure 1

THE SEVEN YA-TAS

ཀ	KA YA-TA	KYA
ཀ'	K'A YA-TA	K'YA
ག	GA YA-TA	GYA
ག'	PA YA-TA	CHA
ཉ	P'A YA-TA	CH'A
ཇ	BA YA-TA	JA
ཇ'	MA YA-TA	NYA

Figure 2

MOTIVATION

At the beginning of a session devoted to studying Tibetan, it is good to focus our attention on what it is that impels us to study. In all the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism we are taught that the commitment to show all beings the way to achieve the state of complete and perfect enlightenment is the highest motivation. So at the beginning of a study session we can reconfirm our resolve to achieve Buddhahood ourselves so that we may then extend this opportunity to all beings. This is a way of speaking about the term *bodhichitta*, the aspiration to awakening, the intention to accomplish enlightenment as the means to further the welfare of all beings. Reaffirming our bodhisattva commitment in this way at the beginning of a study session transforms what could be a dry, academic endeavor into meritorious activity for the benefit of ourselves and all beings.

REVIEW

In the last article, I reviewed our goal of learning to read the Tibetan script and use the Tibetan-English dictionary as being a journey of seven stages. We are now at the fourth of the stages: the subscripts – those letters that can be written beneath other letters. There are four of these letters: YA, RA, LA, and WA. When they are subscribed we call them YA-TA, RA-TA, LA-TA, AND WAZUR. In the last article I presented the LA-TAs. Now I will talk about two other subscripts, the *Wazurs* and the YATAs. If you are following along with the manual of this course, *Introduction to Tibetan Language*, the subscripts are presented on pages 7 and 8.

THE SIXTEEN WAZURS

Wazur refers to the letter WA when it functions as a subscript. The word *zur* can mean “facet,” for when WA is subscribed it is written in the shape of a small wedge or facet. This small device is merely a shorthand abbreviation for the consonant WA. The sixteen letters that can take a subscribed WA can be seen in Figure 1. The spelling complete with the pronunciation for each is given. The subscribed *Wazurs* are silent, and they do not affect the pronunciation of the letter to which they are affixed. The *Wazurs* are spelled by saying the name of the root letter, then the word *Wazur*, and then the name of the root letter again. Notice that this is spelling from the top down again as is the rule for spelling all stacked letters.

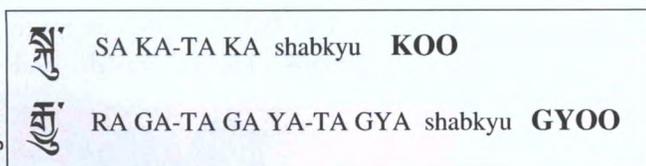
Note that the pronunciation is given in bold. If you were reading or speaking these stacked letters, you would just say that which is in bold. Proper spelling in Tibetan includes pronouncing each syllable at the end of spelling out its elements. Knowing how to spell is extremely useful in communicating with fellow students and lamas or other literate Tibetans.

THE SEVEN YA-TAS

YA, the fourth letter in the sixth row of the syllabary, can be subscribed beneath seven of the thirty consonants. These combinations are called the seven YA-TAs. YA can be subscribed to the first three consonants of the first row of the syllabary (KA, KHA, GA) and all four consonants of the fourth row (PA, PHA, BA, MA). The spelling of the first of the YA-TAs (which has YA subscribed beneath KA) is KA YA-TA=**KYA**.

All the YATAs are listed and spelled in Figure 2. Notice that when the fourth row letters, the PA, PHA, BA, and MA take the subscribed YA (or YA-TA), they jump up to have the same sound as their corresponding consonant in the second row of the syllabary, the CHA row. For instance, when PA, the first consonant of the fourth row, takes a YA-TA, its resulting sound is CHA, a short, high tone exactly like the sound of the first letter in the second row of the chart of the 30 consonants.

Figure 3



SPELLING STACKED LETTERS

Previously we learned that there are three superscripts (the letters that can

be written above root letters). We saw that SA can be superscribed over a KA for instance. And we saw that there are four vowel signs, three of which can be written above and one below the root letter.

The general rule in spelling such stacked letters – combinations of a root letter plus a subscript, a superscript, (or both), and a vowel sign – is that we spell from the top down, and leave the vowel to the last. If we have a stack, such as a SA superscribed over KA with the vowel sign Shabkyu at the bottom, we would have a three element combination which would be spelled SA KA-TA KA Shabkyu **KOO** as illustrated in Figure 3. (KOO usually occurs in Romanized letters as *ku*). This the Tibetan word for the Sanskrit *Kaya*, in English “body, dimension.” It is an honorific word, i.e., one used when the speaker wishes to express respect or reverence. It is used in reference to a respected person’s body or that of a deity, and also in such concepts as Dharmakaya.

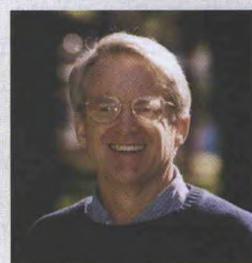
It is also possible to have a stacked letter that is four elements high – a superscript on top of a root letter (one of the thirty consonants), with a subscript below and a vowel sign either below that or on top of the stack. For instance the superscript RA above the root letter GA with a YA-TA and a Shabkyu below would be spelled RA-GA-TA GA YA-TA GYA Shabkyu **GYOO**. GYOO (usually Romanized as *gyu*) is the Tibetan word for “cause,” Sanskrit *hetu*. GYOO is also spelled out in Figure 3.

We have now discussed three of the four subscripts. In the next issue I will discuss the fourth, and at that point, we will have completed four of the seven elements that can make up a Tibetan syllable. One of the remaining three elements occurs merely as a single, silent letter, so our journey is all down hill from here. Remember various free study aids and other help can be found at www.tibetanlanguage.org. ☸

SHERAB

Sherab is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word *Prajna*. *She* (pronounced “shay”) means knowledge or knowing. *Rab* (pronounced “rob”) means superior or best. *Sherab* is the highest kind of knowledge; sublime or absolute wisdom, intelligence, transcendent knowledge. It is the sixth of the Paramitas or perfections.

In the glossary of *Introduction to Tantra, A Vision of Totality*, by Lama Thubten Yeshe, *Sherab* is defined as “the unmistakable understanding of things; specifically, the insight into emptiness: the actual way in which things exist; the antidote to ignorance; symbolized by Manjushri.”



David Curtis is president and executive director of the Tibetan Language Institute. Teaching since 1993, he presents classes and reading seminars on Tibetan throughout America. He teaches students by telephone and has developed a wide variety of learning materials which can be seen at www.tibetanlanguage.org.