

*FPMT Translation Services*

# *A Guide to Sanskrit Transliteration and Pronunciation*

## *Introduction*

Lama Zopa Rinpoche places great importance on the correct pronunciation of Sanskrit mantras. For this reason, and following careful consideration, FPMT Education Services and FPMT Translation Services have decided to adopt the use of the standard international system for transliterating Sanskrit, The International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST), which entails the use of diacritics – that is, dots, accents, and dashes located above and below certain letters. This transliteration scheme will be used primarily in translations of Tibetan and Sanskrit texts.

The use of transliteration is important for the exacting task of preserving and accurately transmitting the Dharma as contained within the vast bodies of Tibetan and Sanskrit Buddhist textual sources. Transliteration allows for the actual conversion of one script into another, with such accuracy that it is possible to reconstruct the original script from the transliteration. The phonetic transcription of Sanskrit, which is what FPMT used in the past, did not capture the original script in this way. Although its main purpose was to make it easier for people untrained in Sanskrit to pronounce mantras and Sanskrit terms, it sacrificed the diacritics that indicate long vowels and retroflex letters, thus resulting in a less accurate pronunciation.

The use of transliteration allows us to bring our practice and study materials to a higher standard. It will also facilitate the research, study, and continued improvement of the translations of our lineage's textual corpus. In fact, the great Tibetan translators (lotsawas) of the past, when translating Buddhist Sanskrit texts into Tibetan, also created a similar transliteration scheme using variants of letters uncommon in ordinary Tibetan script. This transliteration scheme is used by Tibetans to this day.

We recognize that this may present challenges to our readers. However, we are confident that you will soon become accustomed to this form of notation.

The aim of this document is to give a very brief introduction to the transliteration and pronunciation of Sanskrit, and we encourage you to also look up other materials, particularly videos presenting the pronunciation of the Sanskrit alphabet, which can be easily found online.

## *Transliteration in FPMT Translations*

### *Practice Texts*

It should be noted that the use of transliteration in FPMT practice texts will be restricted to cases where the Sanskrit is also transliterated in the Tibetan source text (usually mantras, seed syllables, and short phrases of homage).

To facilitate the pronunciation of some Sanskrit letters in practice texts by non-specialists, we have modified the standard IAST transliteration system slightly, in the following way:

CA is written CHA  
CHA is written CHHA  
ŚA is written ŚHA  
ṢA is written ṢHA  
Ṛ and Ṝ are written ṚI and ṜI  
Ḷ and Ḹ are written ḶI and ḸI  
ŃA is written ŃGA  
CCA is written CCHA  
CCHA is written CCHHA

### *Other Texts*

In other types of translations, diacritics will be used consistently for all Sanskrit terms and names, with the exception of terms that are common or mainstream in "Buddhist English" (e.g. buddha, dakini, samsara).

Translated materials that are not practice texts will employ the standard IAST transliteration system as outlined below.

## *Note on Pronunciation*

The below examples demonstrate the variety of ways one common mantra can be rendered in writing using transliteration or phonetic transcription:

Transliteration of Sanskrit based on the Tibetan script:	jaḥ hūṃ vaṃ hoḥ
Transliteration of Tibetan script (Extended Wylie):	dzaH hUM baM hoH
Phonetic transcription of Tibetan pronunciation:	dza hung bam hoh
Previous FPMT phonetic transcription of Sanskrit:	jah hum bam hoh

Tibetans have a variety of ways of pronouncing Sanskrit and these Tibetan pronunciations are sometimes very different from current internationally accepted norms of what constitutes "correct" Sanskrit pronunciation.

The current document does not discuss the Tibetan pronunciation of Sanskrit. Rather, it was created to facilitate the correct pronunciation of transliterated Sanskrit following the internationally accepted standards adopted by Sanskrit scholars. However, if you have received specific instructions on pronunciation from your teacher, it is always better to follow their explanation as much as possible. You are thus free to make your own decision regarding which system of pronunciation you wish to employ when you read the transliterated script.

The primary aim of transliteration is the conversion of one *script* to another. While the pronunciation of Sanskrit has changed over time in the different geographic regions and situations in which it was used, the constant element that has been maintained in the Tibetan tradition is the transliteration of this sacred language.

## *Sanskrit Pronunciation – A Quick Guide*

The chart below gives examples of terms that include a sound *similar*, but not necessarily exactly equivalent, to the Sanskrit letter with which the term is presented. Note that the English terms given for the retroflex consonants are italicized and that you should consult the notes in this document for more information on their pronunciation.

### **Vowels:**

<b>a</b> ball	<b>ā</b> palm
<b>i</b> sit	<b>ī</b> seek
<b>u</b> suit	<b>ū</b> tool
<b>ṛ</b> river	<b>ṝ</b> reed
<b>ḷ</b> jewelry	<b>ḹ</b> ( <i>not used</i> )
<b>e</b> bale	<b>ai</b> aisle
<b>o</b> cope	<b>au</b> cow
<b>ṁ</b> OM	<b>ḥ</b> (pronounced as an echo of the preceding vowel)

## Consonants:

<b>k</b> bike	<b>kh</b> blockhead	<b>g</b> guitar	<b>gh</b> ghastly	<b>ñ</b> king
<b>c</b> chat	<b>ch</b> chat	<b>j</b> jog	<b>jh</b> bridgehead	<b>ñ</b> onion
<b>ṭ</b> stable	<b>ṭh</b> table	<b>ḍ</b> dart	<b>ḍh</b> redhead	<b>ṇ</b> gentle
<b>t</b> tea	<b>th</b> boathouse	<b>d</b> dart	<b>dh</b> bloodhound	<b>n</b> nine
<b>p</b> pie	<b>ph</b> cup hook	<b>b</b> butter	<b>bh</b> abhor	<b>m</b> mess
<b>y</b> yard	<b>r</b> rule	<b>l</b> leaf	<b>v</b> vase	
<b>ś</b> shawl	<b>ṣ</b> push	<b>s</b> soul	<b>h</b> hand	

Knowing the five points below will allow you to easily learn to pronounce most transliterated Sanskrit mantras:

1. ś and ṣ produce sounds similar to the English "sh" in "**sh**oe."
2. ca is pronounced similar to the "ch" in "**ch**at."
3. ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ are retroflex letters and have no exact equivalent in English. These sounds are made by curling the tongue to the palate and correspond roughly to the sounds: tra (ṭ), aspirated tra (ṭh), dra (ḍ), aspirated dra (ḍh), and nra (ṇ).
4. All consonants followed by an "h" are aspirated: kh, gh, ch, jh, th, dh, ph, bh. Note that th is pronounced like the "t" in "**target**" (not like the "th" in "**the**") and ph is pronounced like the "p" in "**partial**" (not like the "ph" in "**pharaoh**").
5. Vowels with a dash above them, ā, ī, ū, and ṛ, are elongated to approximately double the amount of time it takes to pronounce their non-elongated counterparts – a, i, u, and r.

## Sanskrit Pronunciation Introduction to the Sanskrit Alphabet

Every Sanskrit letter represents only one sound. This is at odds with English in which the letter *a*, for example, can be pronounced in a variety of ways, depending on the word. The few exceptions to this general rule are given below, together with an introduction to the Sanskrit alphabet, its full set of letters, and the diacritics and Roman letter combinations used to transliterate it.

## Vowels

The vowels of the Sanskrit alphabet are: *a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, ṛ, ṝ, ḷ, ḹ, e, ai, o, au.*

Note that the letter *ḹ* is not used and *ḷ* is uncommon.

## Consonants

The consonants of the Sanskrit alphabet are presented in the following groups:

1. The guttural consonants: *k, kh, g, gh, ṅ*  
These are sounds produced from the throat.
2. The palatal consonants: *c, ch, j, jh, ñ*  
These sounds are produced from contact of the tongue with the soft palate at the back of the mouth.
3. The retroflex consonants: *ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ*  
These sounds are produced by curling the tongue to the alveolar ridge at the roof of the mouth.
4. The dental consonants: *t, th, d, dh, n*  
These sounds are produced from touching the tongue to the teeth.
5. The labial consonants: *p, ph, b, bh*  
These sounds are produced from the lips.
6. The semivowels: *y, r, l, v*  
The first is palatal, second retroflex, third dental, and fourth labial.
7. The sibilants: *ś, ṣ, s*  
The first of these is palatal, the second retroflex, and the third dental.
8. The aspirate: *h*  
This is a guttural aspirated sound.

### The *visarga*: *ḥ*

The *visarga* is a final aspiration found at the end of some words that always follows a vowel. This sound is almost a throw-away sound, like a slight echo, and definitely does not require emphasis.

### The *anusvāra*: *ṁ*

The *anusvāra* indicates a nasal sound. At the end of a word, it is always pronounced as an *m*. In other cases, it represents the nasal letter in the same horizontal row of the Sanskrit alphabet as the consonant that follows it (see the chart below). Some Sanskrit texts may omit the *anusvāra*, replacing it instead with the letter representing the actual sound in question, for example writing *sañjaya* instead of *saṁjaya*, although both *ñ* and *ṁ* represent the same sound.

		Consonants											
		Vowels				Un- aspirate	Aspirate	Un- aspirate	Aspirate	Nasal	Semi- Vowel	Sibilant	Aspirate
Guttural	a	ā			k	kh	g	gh	ṅ				h
Palatal	i	ī	e	ai	c	ch	j	jh	ñ	y	ś		
Retroflex	ṛ	ṝ			ṭ	ṭh	ḍ	ḍh	ṇ	r	ṣ		
Dental	ṛ̣	ṝ̣			t	th	d	dh	n	l	s		
Labial	u	ū	o	au	p	ph	b	bh	m	v			
Anusvāra	ṁ												
Visarga	ḥ												

### *Additional Letters and Exceptions*

Several consonant clusters provide problems or exceptions to the general rule of pronunciation that one symbol can only represent one pronunciation:

1. The consonant cluster *sv*

An alternative pronunciation is *sw*, thus you may choose to "correctly" pronounce *svāhā* as either *svāhā* or *swāhā*.

2. The consonant cluster *jñ*

This can be pronounced in several ways such as *gy* or *gñ*. Thus *jñāna* can be "correctly" pronounced as *jñāna*, *gyāna*, or *gñāna*.

*Colophon:*

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