A Guide to Sanskrit Transliteration and Pronunciation

By FPMT Translation Services

Introduction to Transliteration

Lama Zopa Rinpoche places great importance on students correctly pronouncing Sanskrit mantras. For this reason, FPMT Education Services and FPMT Translation Services employ the use of the standard international system for transliterating Sanskrit: The International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). This transliteration scheme makes use of the Roman alphabet with various diacritics (i.e., the dots, accent marks, and dashes located above and below certain letters).

The use of transliteration is important for preserving and accurately transmitting the Dharma contained within the extensive Tibetan and Sanskrit Buddhist canons. Transliteration allows for the conversion of one script into another with such accuracy that it is possible to reconstruct the source script from the transliteration itself. Transliteration is so important that even the great Tibetan translators (*lotsawas*) of the past created a similar transliteration scheme when translating Sanskrit into Tibetan. This same transliteration scheme is still used by Tibetans today.

The phonetic transcription of Sanskrit used by FPMT in the past, however, 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, its lack of diacritics, which indicate specific sounds such as long vowels and retroflex consonants, resulted in inaccurate pronunciation.

The use of transliteration brings FPMT education materials to a higher standard. It facilitates the research, study, and continued improvement of FPMT's translations.
We recognize that this may present some challenges to students. The purpose of this document is to give a very brief introduction to the transliteration and pronunciation of Sanskrit. We encourage students to supplement this document by looking up other materials online, particularly videos, demonstrating the pronunciation of the Sanskrit alphabet.

Note on the Tibetan Pronunciation of Sanskrit

Tibetans have a variety of ways of pronouncing Sanskrit that are sometimes different from the generally accepted norms of what constitutes "correct" Sanskrit pronunciation.

This document, however, does not discuss the Tibetan pronunciation of Sanskrit. Rather, it was created in order to facilitate the correct pronunciation of transliterated Sanskrit following the internationally accepted standards adopted by Sanskrit scholars. However, if students have received specific instructions on pronunciation from their

teachers, it is always better to follow those explanations as much as possible. Students are free to make their own decisions regarding which system of pronunciation they employ when reading transliterations.

The purpose of transliteration is the conversion of one script into another. While the pronunciation of Sanskrit has changed over time in different geographic regions and in different contexts, 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 both the standard transliteration paired with examples of sounds from American English that approximate Sanskrit sounds. They are *not* exact equivalents. Note that the English examples given for the retroflex consonants are marked with an asterisk. See point #3 below for more information on their pronunciation.

Vowels:

a yam	ā father
i sit	ī seek
u suit	ū tool
ṛ cringe	ṝ reed
ḷ jewelry	ḹ (not used in Sanskrit words, but occasionally referenced in other contexts)
e bale	ai aisle
o cope	au cow
ṃ yum	ḥ (pronounced as an echo of the preceding vowel)

Consonants:

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

The following five points will enable you to easily learn the pronunciation of most transliterated Sanskrit terms and mantras:

1. *ś* and *ṣ* produce sounds similar to the English "sh" in "shoe." The difference between the two is where the tongue is positioned in the mouth.

2. *c* is pronounced similarly to the "ch" in "chap."

3. *ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ* are retroflex letters and have no exact equivalent in English. These sounds are made by curling the tongue towards the front section of the palate. They 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, ṭh, ḍh, th, dh, ph, bh.* Note that *th* and *ṭh* are pronounced like the "t" in "target" and the "tr" in "trap," respectively, not like the "th" in "the." The *ph* is pronounced like the "p" in "partial," not like the "ph" in "pharaoh."

5. Long vowels have a dash above them (*ā, ī, ū, ṝ, ḹ*) and take approximately double the amount of time to pronounce versus their short counterparts (*a, i, u, ṛ, ḷ*).

Sanskrit Pronunciation − An In-Depth Guide

In general, each Sanskrit letter represents only one sound. This is different from English in which the letter "a," for example, can be pronounced in a variety of ways (e.g., "ball," "basket," and "base"). Below is a more in-depth guide to pronouncing Sanskrit, including exceptions to this general rule.

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, but is sometimes referenced, 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 sounds are produced from the throat.

2. The palatal consonants: *c, ch, j, jh, ñ*
   These sounds are produced by touching the body of the tongue to the front section of the palate.

3. The retroflex consonants: *ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ*
   These sounds are produced by curling the tongue to the space between the alveolar ridge and the palate.

4. The dental consonants: *t, th, d, dh, n*
   These sounds are produced by touching the tongue to the teeth.

5. The labial consonants: *p, ph, b, bh, m*

These sounds are produced by the lips.
6. The semivowels: *y*, *r*, *l*, *v*
   The first is palatal, the second retroflex, the third dental, and the fourth labial.

7. The sibilants: *ś*, *ṣ*, *s*
   The first 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 subtle, like a slight echo, and does not require emphasis.

The *anusvāra*: ṃ

The *anusvāra* always indicates a nasal sound. At the end of a word, it is always pronounced as an *m*. In other cases, it is pronounced as the nasal letter in the same row (see the chart below) of the Sanskrit alphabet as the consonant that immediately follows it (e.g., *saṃgha* is pronounced like "saṅgha"). Some Sanskrit texts may omit the *anusvāra* altogether, replacing it instead with the corresponding nasal letter itself (e.g., writing out "sañjaya" instead of "saṃjaya").

	Vowels				Consonants							
					Un-aspirated	Aspirated	Un-aspirated	Aspirated	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	ḷ	ḹ			t	th	d	dh	n	l	s	
Labial	u	ū	o	au	p	ph	b	bh	m	v		
Anusvāra	ṃ											
Visarga	ḥ											

Consonant Clusters with Alternative Pronunciations

Two consonant clusters have more than one correct possible 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*
   Alternative pronunciations are "gy" or "gñ." Thus, *jñāna* can be correctly pronounced as "jñāna," "gyāna," or "gñāna."