

An Introduction to Tibetan Prefixes

By David Curtis

This is our ninth article on learning to read Tibetan. In previous articles we looked at the cultural history and background of Buddhism coming to Tibet, as well as the role that the newly-created Dharma language of Tibetan played in the later spreading of the Dharma throughout the country, to the degree that Tibetan Buddhism became *the* culture of the Land of Snows. We stressed that the transformation of Tibetan into a Dharma language was the *sine qua non* of this process. Then we began discussion of the “seven elements,” knowledge of which is necessary in order to know how to read the Tibetan script. Having completed discussion of three of those seven elements, now we are ready to talk about the next element, the prefixes.

The Five Prefixes

The Tibetan term we translate into English as “prefix” is *ngon juke*. *Ngon* means “before” (as in *ngon dro*, the

Preliminary Practices). And *juke* means “to enter.” Thus, in Tibetan the prefixes “enter before” the root letter of a syllable. There are only five letters that can be prefixes: GA, DA, BA, MA, and AH. These are listed in their Tibetan form in Figure 1. Notice that the *AH* that can be a prefix letter is the third letter in the sixth row, that is, the “little *AH*.”

Prefixes are silent and do not affect the pronunciation of the syllable to which they are affixed. When spelling a syllable with a prefix, however, we do say the name of the prefix letter and then the sound *OH*. This *OH* sound indicates that the preceding letter is the prefix of the syllable being spelled. For example the word *this* is spelled out in Figure 2. The word is pronounced “DEE” but spelled AH-OH DA geegoo **DEE**. If the prefix were removed from this syllable, it would still be pronounced in the same manner.

Exceptions Involving the Prefix *DA*

Two important exceptions involving the prefix *DA* when it occurs before the root letter *BA* must be noted.

First, if the prefix *DA* occurs before the root letter *BA*, and the ***BA* has no subscript, superscript, or vowel sign**, then the *BA* is pronounced “WA.” For example, let us look at the Tibetan word for empowerment: *wong*. Here we have DA-OH WA NGA = **WONG**. Because the *DA* has come before the root letter *BA* and it is just plain *BA*, this *BA* is therefore pronounced “WA,” giving us the word *wong* (not *bong*).

However, if the prefix *DA* occurs before the root letter *BA*, and the ***BA* has a subscript and/or a vowel sign**, then both the prefix *DA* and the root letter *BA* are silent and only the remaining letters are pronounced. For an example of this, let us look at the honorific Tibetan word for *head*: *oo*. Here the spelling is DA-OH BA shabkyu OO (as in “moon”).

THE FIVE PREFIXES

ག་	GA
ད་	DA
བ་	BA
མ་	MA
ཨ་	AH

Figure 1

WORDS WITH PREFIXES

འདི་	AH-OH DA geegoo DEE	THIS
མདོ་	MA-OH DA nara DOH	SUTRA
མགོ་	MA-OH GA nara GOH	HEAD
དགེ་བ་	DA-OH GA drengbu <u>GAY</u> <u>WAH</u> GAY WA	VIRTUE
དཔུ་	DA-OH BA shabkyu OO (honorific)	HEAD
དབང་	DA-OH WA NGA WONG	POWER

Figure 2

A Further Exception: The Case of *Khandro*

There is a further important exception that occurs when a two-letter syllable has a first syllable ending in a vowel sound and a second syllable beginning with the Prefix *AH*, the third letter in the sixth row. When this occurs, an “N” sound is pronounced between the two syllables. An example of this can be seen in the Tibetan word for dakini: *khandro*. We expect to find a *NA* in the spelling, but its presence is actually the result of the *AH* suffix being found next to the *AH* prefix of the following syllable. Spelling out the word we have MA-OH KHA AH **KHA** AH-OH GA RA-TA DRA naro **DRO**, and we might expect the resulting word to be pronounced “khadro.” But because of this rule, it is pronounced “**khandro**.”

The importance of knowing the thirty consonants very well cannot be over-emphasized. The many interrelationships among these syllables give rise to a number of rules of spelling and syntax. Knowing even some of these

rules makes reading Tibetan much easier. An example of one of these rules within the present context of the prefixes is that “No prefix can occur on a word with a root letter from its own row of the syllabary of the thirty consonants.”

For instance, *MA* as a prefix can occur before the second, third, and fourth letters from each of the five rows above the dividing line of the syllabary with the exception of the fourth row because *MA* itself is from the fourth row. Now that we know about the Five Prefixes, there are many more words we can spell and read. In Figure 2 we have some new vocabulary words spelled with prefixes.

Word Order in an SOV Language

As we mentioned in the last article, that which we call a prepositional phrase in English can be called a “post-positional phrase” when talking about Tibetan. This is an important concept to grasp and worth repeating here. The English preposition is so called because it is placed before the word it modifies. Its Tibetan counterpart comes *after* the

word it modifies – the opposite of English. For example, in English we would say “in this sutra” but in Tibetan the word order would be “sutra this in.” Looking at Figure 3, we see that Tibetan also places the modifying word “this” after the word it modifies, “sutra.” In this case, the world of Tibetan grammar is rather the opposite of that of English.

Furthermore, in English the general rule of word order for a complete sentence is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), whereas in Tibetan the word order is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). For instance, while English has “She read this sutra,” Tibetan would say “She sutra this read.” So this linguistic classification of a language as SVO or SOV can be very useful for us in understanding some essential differences between English and Tibetan. As we continue studying our new SOV language, this new word order will gradually come to seem quite natural.

Have fun studying Tibetan, and remember, help can be found at www.tibetanlanguage.org ☸

EXAMPLES OF WORD ORDER IN TIBETAN PHRASES

Within a Tibetan phrase, each word is spelled out separately. Each word's pronunciation then appears in boldface. Once each word has been spelled, the entire phrase is then pronounced.

མདོ་འདི་ལ་

MA-OH DA naro **DOH**, AH-OH DA geegoo **DEE**, LA
DOH DEE LA (the complete pronunciation of the phrase)

མདོ་འདི་ལ་

DOH DEE LA
sutra this in
in this sutra

Figure 3

DAM NGAG གདམས་ངག་

Oral Instruction

Dam ngag (pronounced “dahm ngahk”) is the general term for instruction that has been passed down through a Dharma lineage. There are many terms for guidance or instruction, for specific ways of passing on teachings each with its own distinct meaning.

Dam is the past participle of the word *dome pa* meaning “to teach or instruct.”

Ngag is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit *vak*. In general, *ngag* means “speech.” It is often combined with other words to give the sense of “verbal,” “spoken” or “oral.” It is the word for speech in the expression “Body, Speech, and Mind” – an honorific term used for speech when referring to enlightened beings or when speaking respectfully in general.