

Further Explorations

By Lama David Curtis

In the previous eleven articles of this series we sketched the historical and cultural background of the Dharma coming to Tibet from India, and then specifically presented the seven-step process of learning to read the Tibetan script. All of the essentials of learning the script have been covered. In this article, I would like to present a few more details to complete the picture. The subjects covered in this article correspond to Appendices II and III of my manual, *Introduction to Tibetan: Level I*.

Exceptions with AH

I would first like to discuss some of the exceptions that can occur with the suffix *AH*. Here I am referring to the third letter in the sixth row, which Tibetans call "*AH choong*" or "little *AH*." It is involved in several exceptions. I will just mention two important ones here. It is common to see *AH* combined with *gigu* at the end of a word. If *AH* is the suffix of a syllable, the *gigu* is merely affixed on top of the *AH*. In words with no suffix, an *AH* in combination with *gigu* (which is pronounced "EE") can be affixed to the end of the syllable. Examples of these two exceptions are seen in Figure 1.

In both instances, the *AH gigu=EE* is expressing some type of relation. The relation can be between two words, phrases, or entire sentences. It serves to connect the word or words to which it is affixed with the following word or words. For instance, it can make a word modify a following word. To illustrate this: The word *SU* means "who." By affixing the *AH gigu=EE* to it we get *SU-EE*, or "whose." This word can then be put before the word *SA GA-TA GA naro=GO*, which means "door," making the expression "whose door."

Notice that English does something quite parallel when making *who* modify *door*. We simply add the ending *se* to *who*, and we have changed the first word from a noun into an adjective which then modifies the following word *door*. It may be surprising to learn, but as this example illustrates, Tibetan and English are very similar in the way they transform words to make new words.

Secondly, *AH* can also have a *shabkyu* affixed to it; this combination can occur at the end of words to refer to the diminutive of the given word. (The diminutive of a word denotes something small of its kind. For instance *booklet* is the diminutive of *book*.) If there is no vowel sign on the word thus modified, a *gigu* is added to the root letter. For example

བཀའ་	→	བཀའ་འི་	word → of the word
མ་	→	མ་གྱི་	mother → mother's
སུ་	→	སུ་གྱི་	who → whose
རྩ་	→	རྩ་གྱི་	horse → foal

Figure 1

རྫོགས་	→	རྫོགས་ལྔ་	perfect, complete
རྫོགས་	→	རྫོགས་པ་	path
ལམ་	→	ལམ་གྱི་	path
ཡི་ཤེས་	→	ཡི་ཤེས་ལྔ་	primordial wisdom

Figure 2

RA-TA-TA=**TA** means “horse.” If we add a *gigu* to the word *TA* and then affix the *AH shabkyu*, we have **TI-OO** (pronounced “TEE-OO”) meaning “foal”—the small version of a horse. See Figure 1.

The *AH choong* is involved in several other exceptions, but we cannot discuss them here.

Abbreviations & Contractions

Another unusual phenomenon in Tibetan is the convention for forming abbreviations. Words can be shortened to save space in several different ways. Here I will mention just a few examples. First, the combination of a *GA* suffix with a *SA* second suffix is a common occurrence in Tibetan. These suffixes *GA* and *SA* can be abbreviated in one of two ways. Either the second suffix *SA* is subscripted beneath the suffix *GA*, or *both* the *GA* and the *SA* are represented by a backward DA! Either way, these options result in something quite strange-looking to the beginner. See Figure 2.

Abbreviations are looked upon as being rather inappropriate in the sacred texts, yet they do occur. In addition to the above examples, one also commonly finds the abbreviation of the Tibetan letter *MA* by the Sanskrit *anusvara*, a small circle written above the root letter. For instance, the word *LAM* (“path” or “road”) is spelled LA MA=**LAM**. The abbreviation: the *LA* written with a small circle above it. Again see Figure 2.

One final item to be mentioned in regard to abbreviations is the contractions of words. This is similar to what we do in English when the words *are not* become the contraction *aren't*. Tibetan will take a two-syllable word such as YA *drengbu*=YAY, SHA *drengbu* SHAY SA=SHAY= **YAY SHAY** (meaning “primordial wisdom”) and condense it to just the *YA* with two *drengbus* and the suffix *SA*, all written in one syllable. See Figure 2. Some of these do seem to require a bit of cryptography on the reader’s part. Fortunately, the context usually aids one a great deal in deciphering them.

With those final elements, we conclude this, our twelfth and last article on learning to read the Tibetan script.

If you have followed this column over these last two years, you now have the golden key to the *bay yul* or “secret land,” where are found the treasures of the sutras, sadhanas, and tantras, as well as the sublime words of Lama Tsongkhapa, Milarepa, and so many other masters.

I would like to convey my best wishes that you have a profoundly beautiful and meaningful experience in studying this sacred language of the Lamas.

The *Tibetan Language Institute* website at www.tibetan-language.org has information about Tibetan lessons, virtual classes, learning materials, and seminars. It also contains an ever-expanding list of free items to be downloaded to help you on your way. I would very much like to hear from you and am happy to help you in any way I can. ☸



DHARMAKAYA: CHÖ KOO

Chö koo is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *Dharmakaya*. It refers to the absolute or ultimate dimension of reality – the primordial, true, empty nature of being. *Chö* (dharma) here refers to “reality, truth, the ultimate,” and *koo* (kaya) means “dimension, aspect or body.”

ERRATUM

In our previous article in the Etymology Sidebar, we included the Tibetan word for “calm abiding” or *shamatha*. Unfortunately, a typo in Tibetan occurred. The word should be spelled ZHA-*gigu*=ZHEE, GA-“O”NA-SA= NAY =**ZHEE NAY**. ཞི་གནས་



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