

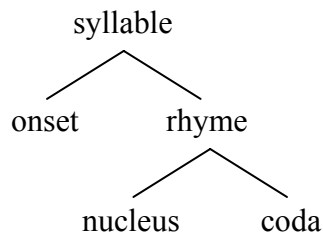
Lesson 2

The Onset of the Syllable

❖ 2.1 The Tibetan Syllable

People generally have a fairly clear intuition about the notion of the syllable in their native language. The following discussion, thus, mainly serves as an introduction to the terminology used in this book to describe the various elements in a Tibetan syllable.

A syllable, universally, contains a nucleus, which is usually a vowel, as the core and the sole obligatory member of the syllable. Most syllables have a consonant (or a cluster of consonants) preceding the nucleus. This consonant (or consonant cluster) is called the onset of the syllable. The nucleus may optionally be followed by a consonant or a cluster of consonants, which is known as the coda. The two elements [nucleus + coda] form an intermediate phonological unit called the rhyme, an intuitive term if one knows why the two English words *right* [rajt] and *bite* [bajt] rhyme. Thus, a syllable has the following structure:



The English words *rip*, *trip*, and *strip* rhyme because they share the same rhyme [ip] consisting of the nucleus [i] and the coda [p]. The onset of the three syllables are [r], [tr], and [str], respectively. One simple way to look at the onset is to say that whatever elements that come before the nucleus will automatically constitute the onset. Tibetan, all dialects in this regard, has a very different idea about what constitutes the onset. In fact, the issue about the onset is so important (and no less fascinating) that we find it necessary to devote the entirety of this lesson to the Tibetan onset. A thorough understanding of what a Tibetan onset consists of and how it is related to the Tibetan orthography will prove extremely helpful to the learner in mastering his or her pronunciation (especially tones) of Lhasa Tibetan for the remainder of the course.

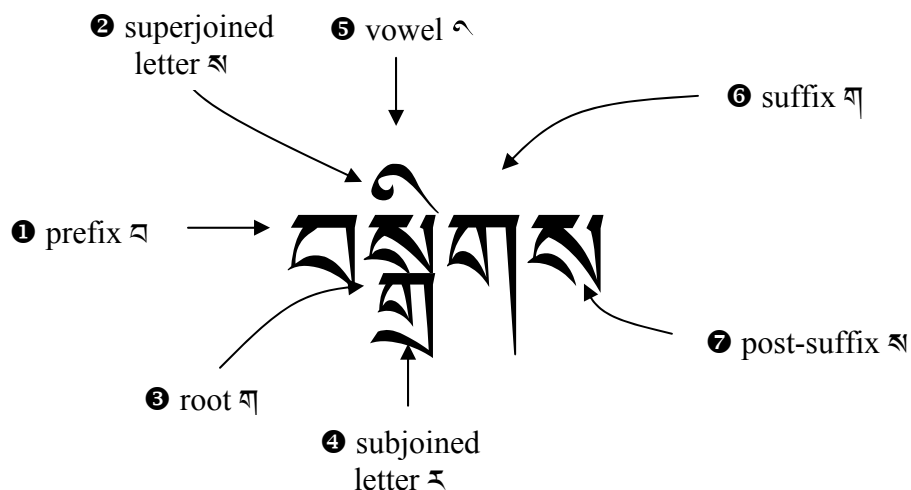
2.1.1 The Writing of a Tibetan Syllable

In Lesson 1, we introduced the basic form of a Tibetan syllable, which consists of the root letter and the vowel diacritic. The vast majority of Tibetan syllables are more complicated than that. Some letters are written on top of the root letter, while others combine with the root letter from underneath. The former are called superjoined letters or superfixes; the latter subjoined letters. Less dramatic are the letters written in a

(horizontal) linear fashion in relation to the root letter. Those which precede the root letter are called prefixed letters or prefixes; those which follow are called suffixes. One additional letter ས can follow a regular suffix. When it does, it is called a post-suffix.

Note that the terms *prefixes* and *suffixes* used here refer only to the Tibetan orthography. They are not used in the normal sense of the word to refer to the morphological structure of a word.

A Tibetan syllable, thus, can contain the whole or a subset of a number of elements including a prefix, a superjoined letter, a subjoined letter, a root letter, a vowel diacritic (could be left unmarked if the vowel is [a]), a suffix, and a post-suffix. The following diagram is of the syllable བསྐྱེགས་ *to line up, to pile*, a "full house" with all seven elements present: ག is called the root letter (མིང་གཞི), བ the prefix (སྐྱེན་འདུག), ས the superjoined letter (མགོ་ཙན), ར the subjoined letter (འདོགས་ཙན), གི་གུ the vowel (དབྱེངས་), the second ག the suffix (རྗེས་འདུག), and the second ས the post-suffix (ཡང་འདུག). The numbers indicate the sequence of the writing.



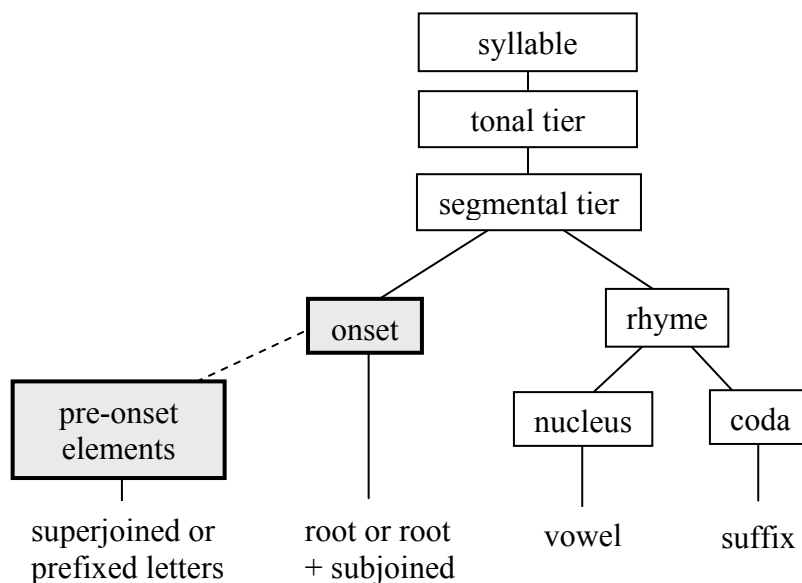
Tibetan writing is syllable-based, i.e., punctuation marks are used to mark boundaries of syllables, not words. Using standard Latin transcription, the syllable shown above can be spelled, letter by letter, as *bsgrigs*. The spelling, although faithful to the Tibetan orthography, certainly does not suggest its actual pronunciation of [trí] in current Lhasa speech. Although written in the same syllable, the *bs* in front of the pronounced onset *gr* [tr] must not be considered as a true part of the onset. Similarly, many Tibetan words have one or two silent consonants that is spelled in front of the pronounced onset. This situation is not unlike the *k* in *knight* and *p* in *psychic* in English. The common impression is that they are required in the spelling but do not contribute to the pronunciation (in English, that is). This impression is not entirely accurate for Tibetan. Believed to be pronounced in Old Tibetan, these odd silent letters, called pre-onset elements in this book

due to their position in the syllable, do contribute to the pronunciation of the syllable in a significant and systematic way.

In the following sections, we will introduce some components of the Tibetan syllable, starting from the subjoined letters and moving on to superjoined letters and prefixes. We will analyze how the pre-onset elements (superjoined letters and prefixes) affect the onset. We hope that, at the end of the four foundational lessons, the learner will be able to easily pronounce *bsgrigs*, or any other bewildering academic spellings, quickly and correctly.

Focusing on the onset first, we will leave the introduction of suffixes and post suffixes to Lesson 3. This is not the traditional order in which Tibetan children learn how to read and write (root, suffix, prefix, subjoined letter, and finally superjoined letter). However, considering the complex interactions among tones and sound segments, the authors feel that it makes more linguistic and pedagogical sense to learn it in this particular sequence.

The following diagram offers a fine-grained look at the *bsgr* part of the syllable *bsgrigs*. We shall start with subjoined letters.



A Lhasa Tibetan Syllable

❖ 2.2 Subjoined Letters (འདོགས་ཅན)

Subjoined letters are the letters written underneath the root letter. Phonologically, they combine with the root letter and form a true onset. This description is at least true to two of the four subjoined letters, namely, ཡ, ར, ལ, and ས. Traditional Tibetan orthography does not regard the subjoined letters as part of the root letter to which they are attached. However, at least for ཡ and ར, they combine with the root letter to become an integral part of the onset, modifying the pronunciation of the root letter. In some cases, even new sounds (phonemes) are created. Subjoined letters do not affect the tone of the root letter.

The subjoined letters are described by the word བཏགས [tə] 'hanging.' Thus, ཡ in a subjoined position is called ཡ'བཏགས། [yätə]. We shall introduce ཡ'བཏགས། ར'བཏགས། [rätə] ལ'བཏགས།[lätə] and མ'བཏགས། [wäsür] (literally “corner wa”) one by one.

2.2.1 ཡ'བཏགས། (The subjoined ཡ)

ཡ'བཏགས།, a palatal glide [y], causes palatalization of the root letter it joins. Note that ཡ'བཏགས། looks different when written as a subjoined letter. Below is an exhaustive list of all the possible root letters that take ཡ'བཏགས།: (H = HH, L = LL)

root letter	ཀ	ཁ	ག	ང	ཅ	ཆ	མ
pronunciation	[k]-H	[k ^h]-H	[k ^h]-L	[p]-H	[p ^h]-H	[p ^h]-L	[m]-L
with ཡ'བཏགས།	ཀྱ	ཁྱ	གྱ	ངྱ	ཅྱ	ཆྱ	མྱ
pronunciation	[ky] -H	[k ^h y]-H	[k ^h y]-L	[c]-H	[c ^h]-H	[c ^h]-L	[ny]-L

There are no new sounds produced here. The three velars ཀྱ, ཁྱ, and ཟྱ are still velar stops with a palatal feature [y] attached to it, although Tibetan speakers’ intuition may take them as new sounds due to orthography. The labial feature of མ is completely taken by ཡ'བཏགས།, making མྱ sounds identical to the palatal nasal ཉ [ny]. The other three labial consonants ར, ལ, ས, when taking ཡ'བཏགས།, become homophonous to the palatal ཅ [c], ཆ [c^h], and ཇ [c^h], respectively. Keep an eye on this group of consonants, especially ཇ, as later they will change their pronunciation rather dramatically when superjoined and prefixed. We will come back to these three in section 2.4.3 when discussing the prefixes ཏ and ཐ.

2.2.2 ར'བཏགས། (The subjoined ར)

ར'བཏགས།, a retroflex consonant, creates three new phonemes in the consonant system, namely [tr], [tr^h], and [sr], identical to the retroflexes in Mandarin Chinese *zhi* 'to know', *chi* 'to eat', and *shi* 'teacher'. When ར'བཏགས། is subjoined to any root letter from the three groups of velars (ཀ, ཁ, ག), alveolars (ཉ, ཐ, ཏ), and labials (ལ, ས, ས), the new combination results in an alveolar retroflex sound [tr^h] or [tr]. Different places of articulation of the root letters do not matter anymore. In other words, the different

writings རྩ, རྩ, and རྩ have the same pronunciation as the aspirated alveolar [tr^h]-HH; similarly, རྩ, རྩ, རྩ merge to one sound: unaspirated [tr]-HH and རྩ, རྩ, རྩ merge to [tr^h]-LL. When རྩ་བཏགས། takes རྩ, the result is the retroflex རྩ [sr] -HH. Interestingly enough, རྩ with རྩ་བཏགས། (རྩ) does not have any effect on its pronunciation. It (རྩ) remains [s]. Nor does རྩ(རྩ), which retains its simple labial nasal personality [m]. Below is the complete list of རྩ་བཏགས།.

root letter	ཀ་ཏ་བ་	ཁ་ག་མ་	ག་ད་བ་	མ་ས་	ལྷ
with རྩ་བཏགས།	ཀྲ་ཏྲ་བྲ་	ཁྲ་གྲ་མྲ་	གྲ་དྲ་བྲ་	མྲ་སྲ་	ལྷྲ
pronunciation	[tr] -H	[tr ^h] -H	[tr ^h] -L	no change	[sr] -H

2.2.3 ལ་བཏགས། (The subjoined ལ)

ལ་བཏགས། is an anomaly among subjoined letters. It is treated as a subjoined letter in the traditional Tibetan grammar, but it behaves, at least phonologically, as the root. While other subjoined letters modify the pronunciation of the root letter, ལ་བཏགས། seems to "take over" entirely. Of the six possible combinations, five of them (ལྷ, ལྷ, ལྷ, ལྷ, ལྷ) are pronounced [l]-HH. The tone is changed from LL to HH. As we shall learn, this change is a typical effect of a prefix or superfix on a sonorant root. In other words, one can imagine that the five supposed root letters (ཀ, ཁ, ག, མ, ལ) are serving ལ་བཏགས། as its superfix. Note, however, except for མ and ལ, the other three (ཀ, ཁ, ག) are not possible superfixes in Tibetan orthography. Thus the traditional analysis; thus the anomaly.

The sixth combination is also irregular: ལྷ has an unexpected pronunciation of [t]-LL. Note that, unlike the other five, the tone of ལྷ remains LL. Some speakers may carry a pre-onset nasal and pronounce it as [ʰt]. We will discuss this phenomenon shortly. Here is a summary of ལ་བཏགས།.

root letter	ཀ་ག་བ་ར་ས།	ལ
with ལ་བཏགས།	ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ་ལྷ།	ལྷ
pronunciation	ལ [l] -H	[t] -L

2.2.4 ལ་བཏགས། (The subjoined ལ)

མ་བཟུང is attached to a rather large number of root letters: ཀ, ར, འ, ཉ, ཌ, ས, མ, ཞ, ཟ, ར, ལ, འ, ལ, ཉ, and even some already with a subjoined letter: འ → འ. Its presence has no effect on the pronunciation of the root letter, but does serve the orthographic purpose of distinguishing words such as ར *robe* vs. the grammatical particle ལ *to/in*. This function resembles the French *accent circonflex* used on *dû* (past participle of *devoir*) to distinguish itself from *du* (contraction of *de le*). Letters with མ་བཟུང look like: ཀ, ར, འ, ཉ, ཌ, ས, མ, ཞ, ཟ, ར, ལ, འ, ལ, ཉ.

❖ **2.3 Pre-onset (I): Superjoined Letters (མགོ་ཕན)**

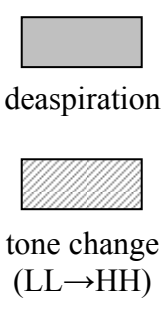
2.3.1 Deaspiration and Tone Change

There is one good reason to put superjoined letters and prefixes all in one bag as "pre-onset" elements. The two groups have virtually the same effect on the root letter: they (i) deaspirate the third column obstruents (ཀ, ར, ཌ, འ, and ས) and (ii) change the tone of sonorants (nasals [m, n, ny, ng], liquids [l, r], and glides [y, w]) from LL to HH. The only difference is that the superjoined letters are written on top of the root and the prefixes precede the root letter.

As we mentioned in Lesson 1, in the Tibetan alphabet table, letters line up in rows and columns, for the most part, according to their place of articulation and manner of articulation. Some members of the third column undergo sound changes when superjoined. They are ཀ, ར, ཌ, འ, and ས, all aspirated low-tone obstruents derived from voiced obstruents in Old Tibetan. Subjoined letters with these "third columners" as the root such as འ, ར, འ and འ are also affected in exactly the same way. (འ is extremely tricky with prefixes and superfixes, which we will deal with separately.) When superjoined, they all become unaspirated, while maintaining the same (low) tone. Sonorants, on the other hand, change their tone from LL to HH.

The alphabet chart below should offer the reader some visual help in remembering the two effects. No voiceless obstruents other than the five third columners are affected by prefixes and superfixes. The two vowels ར and ལ don't participate in this game either. They are all put in parentheses. The shaded areas indicate the deaspiration zone and the the zone of tone change. (Letters with a prefix and/or superfix are marked with a circumflex mark in front.)

Column I	Column II	Column III	Column IV
(ཀ)	(ཁ)	^ག	^ང
(ཅ)	(ཆ)	^ཇ	^ཉ
(ཏ)	(ཐ)	^ད	^ན
(བ)	(མ)	^བ	^མ
(ཙ)	(ཚ)	^ར	^ལ
(ཌ)	(ཌྷ)	(ཎ)	^ཡ
^ར	^ལ	(ཏ)	(ཎ)
(ཏ)	(ཎ)		



deaspiration

tone change (LL→HH)

Chart 2.1 Deaspiration and Tone Change by Pre-onset Element

The effects are obvious with the third columners and nasals. Now the deaspirated [k, c, t, p, ts]-LL (^ག, ^ཇ, ^ད, ^བ, ^ར) contrast with the first column [k, c, t, p, ts]-HH (ཀ, ཅ, ཏ, བ, ཙ) and the prefixed/superfixed nasals (^ར, ^ལ, ^ན, ^མ) contrast with themselves (ར, ལ, ན, མ) in tone. The effect on the glide ཡ can only be seen when it is prefixed by ག. The word *yak* གཡག [yà], for example, is spelled with the གཡག onset with a high tone [y]. The other glide མ, [w]-LL, happens to take no superfix or prefix. The high tone [w] is instead observed from a བ prefixed by ད (དབ), still a manifestation of the effect of tone change by a prefix. Similarly, the retroflex ར does not combine with any superfix or prefix. The high tone [r] is represented by དབ. Finally, for the case of ལ, although not treated as a superfixed ལ, the five combinations (ལྷ, ལྷ, ལྷ, ལྷ, ལྷ, all [l]-HH), discussed earlier with ལ' བཏགལ, exhibit the same effect of tone change.

Recall that in Lesson 1, we point out in Chart 1.5 that more than half of the consonants lack a corresponding tone when represented by a single letter, leaving too many gaps in the system for a tone language to use its full capacity of tonal contrast. With prefixes and superfixes, the gaps are filled nicely, as shown in the following chart.

	labial		alveolar		alveo- palatal		velar/glottal	
unaspirated stops	p	HH པ	t	HH ཏ			k	HH ཀ
		LL པ		LL ཏ				LL ཀ
aspirated stops	p ^h	HH པ	t ^h	HH ཏ			k ^h	HH ཀ
		LL པ		LL ཏ				LL ཀ
fricatives			s	HH ས	sh	HH ས	h	HH ས
				LL ས		LL ས		true gap
unaspirated affricates			ts	HH ཚ	c	HH ཚ		
				LL ཚ		LL ཚ		
aspirated affricates			ts ^h	HH ཚ	c ^h	HH ཚ		
				LL ཚ		LL ཚ		
nasals	m	HH མ	n	HH མ	ny	HH མ	ng	HH མ
		LL མ		LL མ		LL མ		LL མ
liquids			l ₂ l ^h	HH ལ, ལ	r	HH ལ		
				LL ལ		LL ལ		
glides					y	HH ལ, ལ	w	HH ལ
						LL ལ		LL ལ

Chart 2.2 Tonal gaps filled in by prefixed or superfixed letters

When a root letter is simultaneously subjoined and superjoined, it is called a folded letter (བརྩེགས་ཡིག). In a folded letter, the combinations of a third columnner and a subjoined letter are subject to the same effects of deaspiration and tone change. Examples: རྩྭ [kya]-L, རྩྭ [kya]-L, རྩྭ [tra]-L, རྩྭ [tra]-L. Naturally, folded letters that do not involve a third columnner do not undergo any change. Examples: རྩྭ [kya]-H, རྩྭ [kya]-H, རྩྭ [tra]-H. Recall that the three labial consonants པ, པ, པ are palatalized to པ [c]-H, པ [c^h]-H, པ [c^h]-L, respectively, when subjoined by ལ་བརྩེགས. Note the irregular pronunciations involving them, see section 2.4.2 for details.

Sharp-eared learners may notice that some Lhasa speakers pronounce aspirated low toned third columnners ལ, ལ, ལ, ལ, ལ without aspiration, as if they were prefixed. For example, one may find some speakers pronounce the single letter ལ as [ts^ha]-L, some others pronounce it as [tsa]-L, without aspiration. The reason is simple: There are two internal subdialects within the Lhasa speech. One group distinguishes aspirated low tone third columnners from their non-aspirated counterparts (when super- or pre-fixed). For

them the pair ལོ [k^ho]-L *to hear* and ལོ [ko]-L *door* are clearly different. For the other group, the words are simply homophones, both pronounced [ko]-L. There is no social prejudice against either group. This textbook will mark aspiration for these sounds as contrastive.

Now we will discuss the superjoined letters and prefixes one at a time.

2.3.2 ར་མགོ (The superfix ར)

There are three superjoined letters: ར, ལ, and ས, named as ར་མགོ [rǎngkō], ལ་མགོ [lǎngkō] and ས་མགོ [sǎngkō]. Superjoined letters are, with the sole exception of the combination ལྷ [lhā], silent pre-onset elements. The word “silent” here means that the superjoined letters are not pronounced when the syllable is cited alone. When the syllable is morphologically close enough to a preceding syllable, the superjoined letter may then be resurrected and become pronounced. This phenomenon, called by the authors a “leftward liaison”, will be discussed in Lesson 4.

ར་མགོ may be superjoined to one of the following twelve root letters: ཀ, ཁ, ར, ལ, ཅ, ཆ, ཇ, ཉ, ཏ, ཐ, ད, དྷ, ན, ལ, ཕ, བ, མ, ཙ, ཛ. When serving as a superfix, only the first two strokes of ར are written, with only one exception: ལ, where the entire ར is produced. As predicted by the above-mentioned effects, among the twelve combinations, ཀ [k]-L, ཅ [c]-L, ཏ [t]-L, ཐ [p]-L, and ཇ [ts]-L undergo deaspiration. Nasals, ར [ng]-H, ལ [ny]-H, ཏ [n]-H, and མ [m]-H, undergo tone change.

2.3.3 ལ་མགོ (The superfix ལ)

ལ་མགོ may be superjoined to one of the following ten root letters: ཀ, ཁ, ར, ལ, ཅ, ཆ, ཇ, ཉ, ཏ, ཐ, ད, དྷ, ན, ལ, ཕ, བ, མ, ཙ, ཛ. The deaspiration rule affects four of the ten combinations: ཀ [ka]-L, ར [ca]-L, ཏ [ta]-L, and ཐ [p]-L. Tone change affects ལ, now [ng]-H. The combination ལྷ creates a new phoneme in the sound system, the aspirated lateral [l^ha]-H.

ལ་མགོ may have a nasal quality in situations when a pre-onset element is pronounced as the coda of the previous syllable. When this happens, the superfix ལ behaves just like the prefixes ས and ར. See 2.4.2 and 2.5.2 for relevant discussion.

2.3.4 ས་མགོ (The superfix ས)

ས་མགོ may be superjoined to one of the following eleven root letters: ཀ, ཁ, ར, ལ, ཅ, ཆ, ཇ, ཉ, ཏ, ཐ, ད, དྷ, ན, ལ, ཕ, བ, མ, ཙ, ཛ. Like other superjoiners, ས་མགོ triggers the deaspiration rule for the third columners,

causing the following sound changes: ལ [ka]-L, ལ [ta]-L, and ལ [pa]-L. The velar nasal ལ also becomes a high tone [ng]-H.

❖ 2.4 Pre-onset (II): Prefixes (ལོ་ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་)

There are five prefixes: ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་ and ལ. Besides the fact that prefixes are written horizontally to the left of the root letter, there is little to be said about them that we have not already said about superjoined letters. Prefixes resemble superjoined letters in that they are not part of the onset. As silent pre-onset elements, they trigger the deaspiration rule on third columners and tone change on sonorants.

2.4.1 Prefixes ལ, ལ, and ལ

Prefixes may appear to the left of a root letter, a superjoined letter, a subjoined letter, or a folded letter. Remember that they create the same effects of deaspiration and tone change before the “appropriate” root letters just as a superfix. Even if the appropriate root letter is already affected by a superfix, the prefix’s effect applies anyway, although vacuously. For example, the aspirated ལ [t^h]-LL becomes deaspirated [t]-LL either with a superfix (ལ, ལ, ལ), a prefix (ལལ, ལལ, ལལ, ལལ), or with both (ལལ, ལལ).

The prefix ལ creates three remarkable exceptions: (1) ལ + ལ [p^h]-LL becomes ལལ [w]-HH; (2) ལ + ལ [c^h]-LL becomes ལལ [y]-HH; and (3) ལ + ལ [tr^h]-LL becomes ལལ [r]-HH. The following examples are useful words to remember the pronunciations by.

- (1) ལལལལ [wā:ngcā] ‘power, authority, rights’
- (2) ལལལལ [yā:kā] ‘summer’
- (3) ལལལ [rē:] ‘to tear, to rip’

The interaction between the root letters ལ, ལ, ལ and the prefix ལ is summarized below in Chart 2.3.

root letter	with ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་	prefixed	with ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་ལ་	prefixed
ལ [p]-HH	ལ [c]-HH	ལལ [c]-HH	ལ [tr]-HH	ལལ [tr]-HH
ལ [p ^h]-HH	ལ [c ^h]-HH	ལལ [c ^h]-HH	ལ [tr ^h]-HH	ལལ [tr ^h]-HH
ལ [p ^h]-LL	ལ [c ^h]-LL	ལལ [y]-HH	ལ [tr ^h]-LL	ལལ [r]-HH
ལལ [w]-HH		ལལ [c]-LL		

Chart 2.3 Labial Root Letters and Their Variations

2.4.2 Prefixes ལ and ལ

The prefixes མ and འ affect the root letter in exactly the same way as the other three prefixes. The only difference is that མ and འ also have an underlying nasal sound. Together with the superfix ལ, the three form a natural group of pre-onset nasal consonant. Some Lhasa Tibetans constantly pronounce the nasal sound of མ, འ, and ལ in front of the root letter even when the syllable is in isolation. For example, among the nine combinations ར, ལ, ལ, ལ, ལ, ལ, ལ, ལ, and ལ, the ones with pre-onset མ, འ, and ལ can be pronounced as [nt]. In the summary chart of all consonants, the possible pre-onset nasal sound is marked with an asterisk mark: *ལ, *མ, *འ. It should be noted that this nasal sound is not specified for a specific place of articulation and that it is decided by the place of articulation of the root letter. The same prefix མ, for instance, is pronounced differently as [m], [n], and [ŋ] in front of *མ [nt] and *མག [ngk], respectively; whereas different prefixes are pronounced identically as [mp] in front of the same root *ལ and *འ ལ.

The three nasal pre-onset letters tend to be pronounced as the coda of the previous syllable if the two syllables are morphologically or syntactically close enough. See 2.5.2 for examples.

❖ 2.6 Oral Spelling (I)

2.6.1 Simple Syllables

The peculiar way of spelling out a syllable orally is unique to the Tibetan language. Unlike English, which spells out words in a letter-by-letter fashion, Tibetan spells out syllables in a "progressively-staged" fashion. Take the word *knight* for example. English employs a straightforward K-N-I-G-H-T- *knight* [najt] oral spelling. The progressively-staged fashion of Tibetan spelling works like this: K-N reads N [ɛn], plus I becomes NEE [ni], plus GH becomes NIE [naj], plus T results in NITE [najt]. The intermediate stages [ɛn], [ni], and [naj] are all spelled out before the final output [najt] is reached. This may sound complicated and difficult, but it is not. The traditional method of language education in Tibet trains young pupils to master oral spelling even before they are to read texts. This is because, as homonyms such as *there*, *their*, and *they're*, exist in abundance in Tibetan, oral spelling serves an important role in preserving the written tradition. As a result, anyone who has had a couple of years of formal education at a Tibetan elementary school knows this spelling method like the back of his hand and can do it in rapid rhythm. Often, when asked by someone how a word is written, a native speaker of Tibetan will immediately perform the oral spelling. Therefore, it is practical to learn this method well. In this lesson, we will introduce the more basic oral spellings. More complicated syllables will be covered in Lesson 3.

Basic concept first. Oral spelling does not spell out vowels by their sound values such as [a], [i], [u], [e], [o] but by their formal names, namely ཀི་ལྷུ [k^hikū] for [i], འབམ་ལྷུ [shäpkyū] (or more colloquially [shäpcū]) for [u], འབྲེང་ལྷུ [trë:ngpū] (or [trë:ngpō]) for [e], and འཛོ་ [näro] for [o]. The vowel [a] is assumed as default and needs not be spelled out.

Examples:

- (1) ཀྱི spells [kā k^hikū kī]
- (2) རྫོ spells [ngă nărō ngö]
- (3) ལྷ spells [c^hā shăpcū c^hū]
- (4) རྩེ spells [t^hē trë:ngpō t^hē]
- (5) རྩ simply spells [nă] (འ)

For syllables without an onset (initial consonant), either ཨ (HH) or ལ (LL) fills in to carry the vowel diacritic (or in the case of [a], to represent the entire syllable [a]).

Examples:

- (6) རྫོ spells [ă nărō ǒ]
- (7) ལྷ spells [ā shăpcū ū]

A multisyllabic word is spelt out syllable by syllable before the whole word is repeated. Examples: (Note that the tone sandhi rule is at work.)

- (8) ལྷ་ལྷ 'apple' spells [kā shăpcū kū | shā shăpcū shū | kūshū]
- (9) ལྷ་མོ 'younger sister' spells [nă shăpcū nū | mă nărō mǒ | nūmō]
- (10) རྩེ་མ 'sun' spells [nyă k^hikū nyī | mă | nyīmā]
- (11) ལ་རྩེ 'what' spells [k^hă | ră trëngpō rě | k^hărē]

2.6.2 Subjoined, Superjoined, and Prefixed Letters

The relation between a prefix and what follows (superfix or root letter) to its right is specified by the word རྫོག [wò] or [ò] ‘under’. For example, the word ལྷ་ལྷ ‘ten’ is spelt as [p^hăwò | cā shăpcū cū]. A different word ལྷ་ལྷ [tà] (or [ptà]) ‘fastened, tied to’ is used to indicate the vertical relationship between a superfix and a root letter or between a root letter and a subscript. The basic idea is to make sure that when spelling two letters A and B, with A stacking on top of B, one says A-B-ལྷ་ལྷ [tà], literally *A with B attached (underneath)*. For example, the word ལྷ ‘horse’ is spelt as [ră | tātà | tā]. The prefix ལ of ལྷ་ལྷ may be pronounced, in which case the spell-out becomes [ră | tāptà | tā]. The root-subscript (A-B) sequence is also A-B-ལྷ་ལྷ [tà], followed by the new sound. For example, ལྷ spells [k^hă rătà tr^hă]. More examples:

- (12) ལྷི ‘throne’ spells [k^hă rătà tr^hă | k^hikū tr^hī]
- (12) ལྷེ ‘tip’ spells [ră tsātà tsā | trë:ngpō tsē]

(13) དབེ་ཆ ‘book’ spells [t^hǎwò | pā trě:ngpō pē | c^hā | pēcā]

(14) བཟོ་བ ‘worker’ spells [p^hǎwò | sā nǎrō sǒ | pā | sǒpā]

Recall that superfixes and prefixes trigger deaspiration and tone change on third columns and sonorants, respectively. The oral spelling wastes no time in noting this sound change. For example, when the aspirated ཁ is preceded by a superfix ར, the [k^h]-LL is deaspirated to [k]-LL as a result. The spelling for རྩ, [rǎ kǎtā kǎ], addresses the sound change when ཁ is mentioned the first time. The oral spelling does not “derive” [k] by saying *[rǎ k^hǎtā kǎ]. The same philosophy applies to prefix-root sequence. For example, the word མཚོ་མོ་ ‘head’ is spelt as [mǎwò | kǎ nǎrō kǒ] and not *[mǎwò | k^hǎ nǎrō kǒ]. More examples:

(15) སྣ spells [sā nātā nā] (not *[sā nǎtā nā])

(16) རྩ spells [rǎ tsātā tsǎ | nǎrō tsǒ] (not *[rǎ ts^hǎtā tsǎ | nǎrō tsǒ])

In case of a folded letter, with a superfix over the root letter over a subjoined letter, one simply repeats the use of བཏགས following the examples: རྩྭ [sā kǎtā kǎ | yātā kyǎ | nǎrō kyǒ] and རྩྭ [sā kǎtā kǎ | rātā trǎ | shǎpcū trǎ]. More examples:

(17) དགྲ ‘enemy’ spells [t^hǎwò | kǎ rātā trǎ]

(18) བཏགས ‘lovely’ spells [p^hǎwò | kǎ rātā trā]

(19) སྣྱླ ‘morning’ spells [sā ngātā ngā | t^hǎ rātā tr^hǎ | nǎrō tr^hǒ | ngātrō]

This last example merits some comments. First, the superfix ས [sāngkō] changes the tone of the nasal ར to high tone. Then, the subscript ར [rātā] changes the root ར to a retroflex [tr^h]-LL. Finally, when the two syllables are put together, the onset of the second syllable ([tr^h]) becomes deaspirated ([tr]), rendering སྣྱླ [ngātrō] (see Lesson 4 for more detail). We will continue the second part of oral spelling in Lesson 3, after having learned the pronunciation of the rhyme.

❖ 2.7 Summary of Consonants

In Lesson 1 we mentioned that individual letters in the alphabet only represent a subset of the consonantal phonemes in Lhasa Tibetan, 21 out of 25, to be exact. A more conspicuous problem is the lack of one tone for some of the sounds. By adding subscript letters, prefixes, and superfixes, 4 more consonants ([tr, tr^h, sr, l^h]) are represented and most of the tonal gaps are filled. The only three sounds that have only one tone (HH) are ར, ས, and ལ [h, sh, l^h]. Although the correspondence between sound and orthography in Tibetan is remarkably systematic, it may be overwhelming at the beginning for learners.

The following two charts offer sound-based or orthography-based references for our readers to check pronunciation of consonants.

2.7.1 Summary of Sound-Orthography Correspondence

Sound	High Tone	Low Tone
p	པ། བ། ས། ར། པ།	པ། ས། *ལ། *འ།
p ^h	པ། འ།	པ།
t	ཏ། བཏ། བཏ། ཏ། ཏ། ཏ། བཏ། བཏ། བཏ།	ཏ། བཏ། ཏ། ཏ། བཏ། བཏ། *མཏ། *འཏ། *ལ། *ལ། *འཏ། *ལ།
t ^h	ཏ། འཏ། འཏ།	ཏ། ཏ།
k	ཀ། ཀ། བཀ། བཀ། ཀ། ཀ། བཀ། བཀ།	ཀ། བཀ། ཀ། ཀ། བཀ། བཀ། ཀ། *མཀ། *འཀ།
k ^h	ཀ། ཏ། མཀ། འཀ།	ཀ། ཀ།
ky	ཀ། ཏ། བཀ། ཏ། ཏ། བཀ། བཀ།	ཏ། བཀ། ཏ། ཏ། བཀ། བཀ། *མཀ། *འཀ།
ky ^h	ཏ། ཏ། འཀ།	ཀ།
c	ཅ། བཅ། བཅ། ཅ། ཅ། བཅ། ཅ།	ཅ། བཅ། ཅ། ཅ། *མཅ། *འཅ། *འཅ།
c ^h	ཅ། བཅ། འཅ། ཅ། འཅ།	ཅ། ཅ།
ts	ཅ། ཅ། ཅ། བཅ། བཅ། བཅ། ཅ། ཅ།	ཅ། བཅ། *མཅ། *འཅ།
ts ^h	ཅ། ཅ། བཅ། འཅ།	ཅ།
tr	ཏ། ཏ། བཏ། ཏ། བཏ། ཏ། ཏ། ཏ། ཏ།	ཏ། བཏ། ཏ། བཏ། ཏ། *མཏ། *འཏ། *འཏ། *འཏ།
tr ^h	ཏ། ཏ། ཏ།	ཏ། ཏ། ཏ། ཏ།
s	ས། ས། ས། ས། བས། བས།	ས། ས། བས། བས།
sh	ཤ། ཤ། བཤ། བཤ།	ཤ། ཤ། བཤ། བཤ།
sr	ཤ།	---
h	ཏ། ཏ།	---

m	དམ། མ། མྱ།	མ། མྱ།
n	གན། མན། རྣ། རྣ། བན། བན།	ན།
ny	གཉ། མཉ། རྣ། རྣ། བན། བན། དམ།	ཉ། ཉྱ། ཉྱ།
ng	དང། བང། ར། ར། ར། བང། བང།	ང།
r	དབ།	བ། ར།
l	ལ། ལ། ལ། ལ། ལ། བལ། བལ། བལ།	ལ། ལ།
l ^h	ལྷ།	---
y	གཡ། དབྱ།	ཡ།
w	དབ།	ཞ།

2.7.2 Summary of Orthography-Sound Correspondence

(* indicates pre-onset nasal possible for some speakers.)

Root	Orthographic Environment	Sound	Exhaustive Listing
ཀ	single or with prefix/superfix	[k]-H	ཀ། ཀྱ། དཀ། བཀ། ཀ། རྣ། རྣ། བན། བན།
	subscribed by ཡ, with or without prefix/superfix	[ky]-H	ཀྱ། དཀྱ། བཀྱ། རྣ། རྣ། བན། བན།
	subscribed by ར, with or without prefix/superfix	[tr]-H	ཀྱ། དཀྱ། བཀྱ། རྣ། བན།
ཁ	single or with prefix/superfix	[k ^h]-H	ཁ། ཁ། མཁ། མཁ།
	subscribed by ཡ, with or without prefix/superfix	[k ^h y]-H	ཁྱ། མཁྱ། མཁྱ།
	subscribed by ར, with or without prefix/superfix	[tr ^h]-H	ཁྱ།
	single letter	[k ^h]-L	ག། ལྷ།
	with prefix/superfix	[k]-L	དག། བག། རྣ། རྣ། བན། བན། རྣ། *མག། *མག།
	subscribed by ཡ, single letter	[k ^h y]-L	གྱ།

ཀ	subscribed by ཨ, with prefix/superfix	[ky]-L	དཀའ་ བཀའ་ རྒྱ་ རྒྱ་ བཀྱ་ བཀྱ་ *མཀྱ་ *འཀྱ་
	subscribed by ར, single letter	[tr ^h]-L	གྲ།
	subscribed by ར, with prefix/superfix	[tr]-L	དགྲ། བགྲ། རྒྱ། བརྒྱ། རྒྱ། *མགྲ། *འགྲ།
ང	single	[ng]-L	ང།
	with prefix/superfix	[ng]-H	དང། བང། ད། ལ། ལ། བད། བལ།
ཅ	single or with prefix/superfix	[c]-H	ཅ། གཅ། བཅ། ཅ།
ཆ	single or with prefix/superfix	[c ^h]-H	ཆ། མཆ། འཆ།
ཇ	single	[c ^h]-L	ཇ།
	with prefix/superfix	[c]-L	ཇ། བཇ། ཇ། *མཇ། *འཇ།
ཉ	single	[ny]-L	ཉ། ལྷ།
	with prefix/superfix	[ny]-H	གཉ། མཉ། རྩ། རྩ། བརྩ། བརྩ།
ཏ	single or with prefix/superfix	[t]-H	ཏ། གཏ། བཏ། ཏ། ལྷ། ལྷ། བཏ། བལྷ། བལྷ།
	subscribed by ར, with or without prefix/superfix	[tr]-H	ཏ།
ཐ	single or with prefix/superfix	[t ^h]-H	ཐ། མཐ། འཐ།
	subscribed by ར, with or without prefix/superfix	[tr ^h]-H	ཐ།
ད	single letter	[t ^h]-L	ད། ད།
	with prefix/superfix	[t]-L	གད། བད། ད། ལ། བད། བལ། *མད། *འད། *ལྷ། *འལྷ།
	subscribed by ར, single letter	[tr ^h]-L	ད།

	subscribed by ར, with prefix/superfix	[tr]-L	*འབྲ།
ན	single letter	[n]-L	ན།
	with prefix/superfix	[n]-H	གན། མན། རྩ། ལྷ། བན། བལྷ།
པ	single or with prefix/superfix	[p]-H	པ། ལྷ། ལྷ། རཔ།
	subscribed by ལ, with or without prefix/superfix	[c]-H	ཕ། རཕ།
	subscribed by ར, with or without prefix/superfix	[tr]-H	ཐ། རཐ། ལྷ།
ཕ	single or with prefix/superfix	[p ^h]-H	ཕ། འཕ།
	subscribed by ལ, with or without prefix/superfix	[c ^h]-H	ཆ།
	subscribed by ར, with or without prefix/superfix	[tr ^h]-H	ཇ།
བ	single letter	[p ^h]-L	བ།
	with prefix/superfix other than ཅ	[p]-L	བ། ལྷ། *ལྷ། *འབ།
	with prefix ཅ	[w]-H	ཅབ།
	subscribed by ལ single letter	[c ^h]-L	ཆ།
	subscribed by ལ with prefix འ	[c]-L	ཇ། *འཇ།
	subscribed by ལ with prefix ཅ	[y]-H	ཅཆ།
	subscribed by ར, single letter	[tr ^h]-L	ཐ།
	subscribed by ར, with prefix འ	[tr]-L	*འཐ།
	subscribed by ར, with prefix ཅ	[r]-H	ཅཐ།
	single letter or subscribed by ར	[m]-L	མ། ལྷ།

མ	with prefix/superfix	[m]-H	མམ མམ མམ
	subscribed by ཡ	[ny]-L	མྱ
	subscribed by ར, with prefix ཏ	[ny]-H	ཏམྱ
ཙ	single or with prefix/superfix	[ts]-H	ཙ ཙ ཙ གཙ བཙ གཙ བཙ
མ	single or with prefix/superfix	[ts ^h]-H	མ མྱ མཚ འཚ
ལ	single	[ts ^h]-L	ལ
	with prefix/superfix	[ts]-L	ལ བལ *མལ *འལ
མ	single (only)	[w]-L	མ
ཞ	single or with prefix/superfix	[sh]-L	ཞ ཞ ཞ གཞ བཞ
ཟ	single or with prefix/superfix	[s]-L	ཟ ཟ ཞཟ བཟ
	subscribed by ཡ	[t]-L	*ཟྱ *ཟྱྱ
མ	single	[y]-L	མ
	with prefix ག	[y]-H	གམ
ར	single (only)	[r]-L	ར ར
ལ	single	[l]-L	ལ ལྱ
	subscribed ཡ acts as if it were the root letter in these cases	[l]-H	ལྱ ལྱ ལྱ ལྱ ལྱ ལྱྱ ལྱྱ ལྱྱ
ཤ	single or with prefix/superfix	[sh]-H	ཤ ཤ གཤ བཤ
ས	single or with prefix/superfix	[s]-H	ས ས གས བས བས བས
	single (only)	[h]-H	ཧ ཧྱ

ཧ	subscribed by ར	[sr]-H	ཧ།
	superscribed by ལ	[l ^h]-H	ཧ།

❖ 2.8 Exercises

2.8.1 Pronunciation Drill (I): subjoined letters

- | | | | |
|-------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) ལ། ལ། | (7) ལ། ལ། | (13) ལོ། ལོ། | (19) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (2) ལི། ལི། | (8) ལ། ལ། | (14) ལོ། ལོ། | (20) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (3) ལོ། ལོ། | (9) ལ། ལ། | (15) ལ། ལ། | (21) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (4) ལ། ལ། | (10) ལ། ལ། | (16) ལ། ལ། | (22) ལ། ལ། |
| (5) ལ། ལ། | (11) ལ། ལ། | (17) ལོ། ལོ། | (23) ལ། ལ། |
| (6) ལོ། ལོ། | (12) ལ། ལ། | (18) ལ། ལ། | (24) ལ། ལ། |

2.8.2 Pronunciation Drill (II): superjoined and prefixed letters

- | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| (1) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། | (7) ལ། ལ། ལ། | (13) ལ། ལ། | (19) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། |
| (2) ལ། ལ། | (8) ལོ། ལོ། | (14) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། | (20) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། |
| (3) ལོ། ལོ། | (9) ལ། ལ། | (15) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། | (21) ལ། ལ། ལ། |
| (4) ལ། ལ། | (10) ལ། ལ། ལ། | (16) ལོ། ལོ། | (22) ལ། ལ། ལ། ལ། |
| (5) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། | (11) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། | (17) ལ། ལ། ལ། | (23) ལ། ལ། ལ། |
| (6) ལ། ལ། ལ། | (12) ལོ། ལོ། ལོ། | (18) ལ། ལ། ལ། | (24) ལ། ལ། ལ། |

2.8.3 Pronunciation Drill (III): disyllabic words

- | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) ལོ། ལོ། | (8) ལོ། ལོ། | (15) ལོ། ལོ། | (22) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (2) ལོ། ལོ། | (9) ལོ། ལོ། | (16) ལོ། ལོ། | (23) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (3) ལོ། ལོ། | (10) ལོ། ལོ། | (17) ལོ། ལོ། | (24) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (4) ལོ། ལོ། | (11) ལོ། ལོ། | (18) ལོ། ལོ། | (25) ལོ། ལོ། |
| (5) ལོ། ལོ། | (12) ལོ། ལོ། | (19) ལོ། ལོ། | (26) ལོ། ལོ། |

- | | | | |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| (6) རྩོ་བ། | (13) ལྷོ་དྲོ། | (20) ལྷོ་བ། | (27) ལྷ་མ། |
| (7) ལྷོ་བོ། | (14) ལྷ་བ། | (21) ལྷ་ལེ། | (28) ལྷོ་བ། |

2.8.4 Tone Discrimination: circle the syllable which has a different tone from others

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (6) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (2) ལྷ་ད། ལྷ་འ། ལྷ་ཨ། ལྷ་ཟ། | (7) ལྷ་ད། ལྷ་ག། ལྷ། ལྷ་ད། |
| (3) ལྷ་མ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (8) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (4) ལྷ་ལ། ལྷ་ལ། ལྷ་ལ། | (9) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (5) ལྷ་ལ། ལྷ་ལ། ལྷ་ལ། ལྷ་ལ། | (10) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |

2.8.5 Sound Discrimination: circle the syllable which has a different pronunciation from others

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| (1) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (6) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (2) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (7) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (3) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (8) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (4) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (9) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |
| (5) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། | (10) ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། ལྷ། |

2.8.6 Oral Spelling (I): spell out the syllables

- | | | | |
|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| (1) ལྷོ་བ། | (4) ལྷོ་བ། | (7) ལྷོ་བ། | (10) ལྷོ་བ། |
| (2) ལྷོ་བ། | (5) ལྷོ་བ། | (8) ལྷོ་བ། | (11) ལྷོ་བ། |
| (3) ལྷོ་བ། | (6) ལྷོ་བ། | (9) ལྷོ་བ། | (12) ལྷོ་བ། |

2.8.7 Oral Spelling (II): Listen to the recording and write down the syllables.

- | | | | |
|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| (1) ལྷོ་བ། | (4) ལྷོ་བ། | (7) ལྷོ་བ། | (10) ལྷོ་བ། |
| (2) ལྷོ་བ། | (5) ལྷོ་བ། | (8) ལྷོ་བ། | (11) ལྷོ་བ། |
| (3) ལྷོ་བ། | (6) ལྷོ་བ། | (9) ལྷོ་བ། | (12) ལྷོ་བ། |